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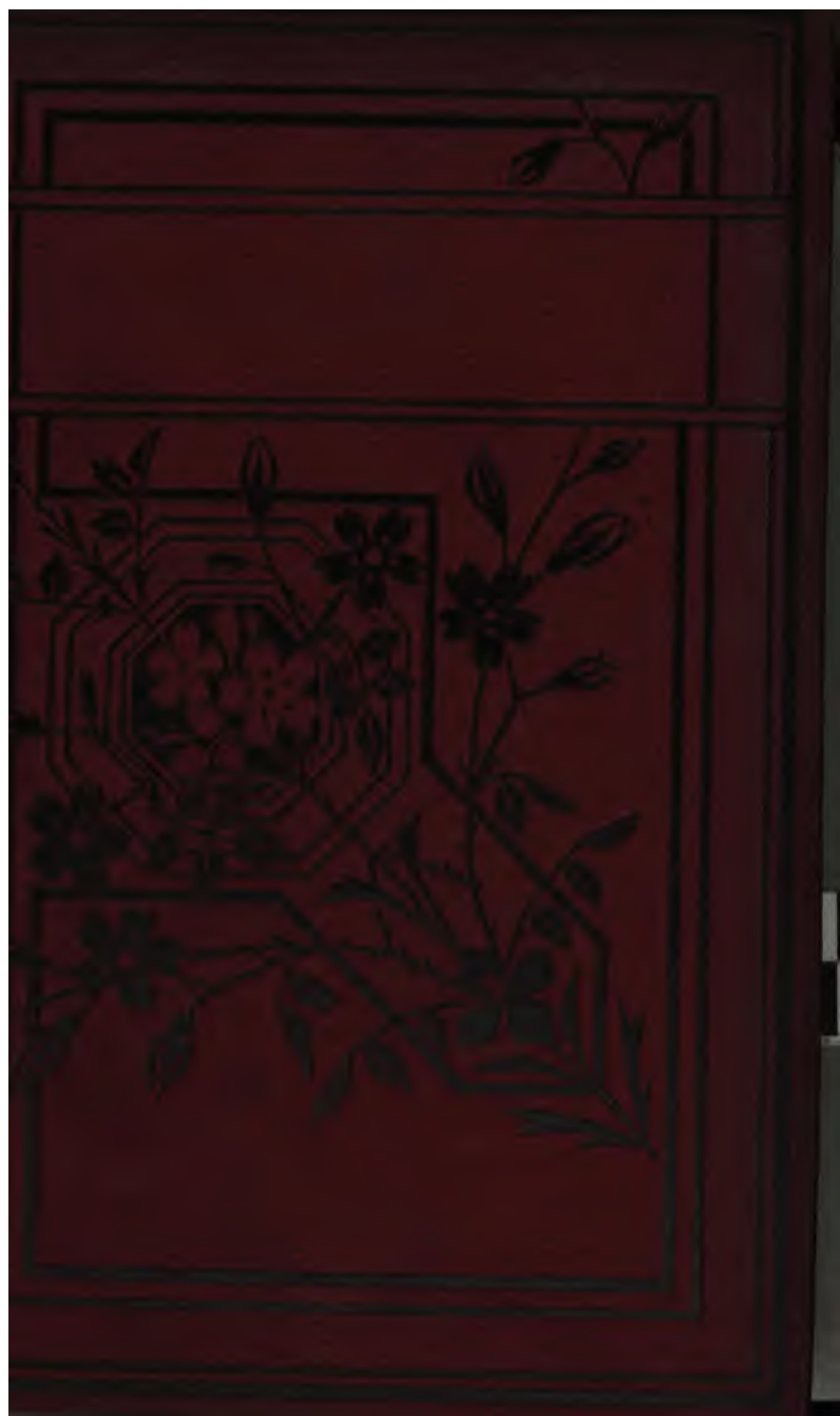
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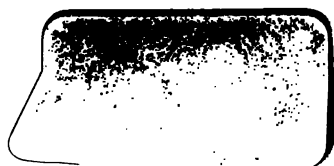
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TOUCH AND GO

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TOUCH AND GO

BY

JEAN MIDDLEMASS

Author of 'Wild Georgie' 'Mr Dorillion' &c.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.



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TOUCH AND GO.

CHAPTER I.

SWINTON HALL.

BACK again at Swinton. The forest trees waving as of yore ; the water by the old mill rushing unceasingly ; animal and vegetable life as it was wont to be, the very same cows and horses basking in the sun. All familiar, well-remembered, and unchanged—all save that inner self which forms the great essential as one views a picture.

Cicely is standing on the lawn in front of Swinton Hall. Mrs. Bertrand's invitation has

been given and accepted, and Sir Hubert and Lady Fleming are among the guests who have just arrived to grace with their presence some festivities which are to awaken the echoes round the old place, stilled as they have been to the tones of merriment and joy while the family has been abroad these two years past. Cicely looks round her musingly; she has cast off for the moment those dashing spirits she had assumed of late in London, and is once more dreaming of her happy childhood before 'that dreadful time had come since when she had known real happiness no more.'

'A whole sovereign for your thoughts, Cis,' said Sir Hubert, going up to her.

She shook herself awake with an effort.

'I was not thinking, only dreaming—you forget I was a little girl here once.'

'And was that such a very melancholy

time, that you dwell on it thus sadly, my love?'

'Melancholy? Oh no; it was all too bright—far brighter than——' She marked the pained look her words occasioned. 'What am I saying, Sir Hubert? I believe I must have been thinking of grand-dad's death when you disturbed my reverie. Ah, there is Mr. Burke—dear, good Mr. Burke!' And she rushed away from her husband to meet the Vicar, who was coming across the lawn.

'My child—my little Cis—come back a very fine lady!' And the Vicar sought vainly to conceal the tone of pathos which would in spite of his efforts manifest itself in his voice.

'Owing to all your care and all your instructions,' she replied. 'Oh! Mr. Burke, I never thanked you half enough for all you taught me and did for me. If I had not

been horridly ungrateful I should never have left Swinton.'

'Since your going has turned out so well there is nothing to regret, child. I was somewhat lonely after you left, I must confess, but it is a blessing to see you come back looking so bonny.'

'You never wrote me one line when I married. It was too unkind of you. I thought you disapproved,' she said, shaking her finger at him.

'My approval had naught to do with the matter. Durant had elected himself your guardian—what did he think?'

'Oh, he—well, I suppose he did not trouble himself about it, as long as I was pleased.'

'I always thought you would marry Durant. How came the change in the programme?'

Cicely's face was like a scarlet peony.

‘Ask Mrs. Fitzalan—she knows best. In France young girls are not allowed to have opinions. Besides, you are quite mistaken if you imagine Mr. Durant ever wanted to marry me. He quite approves of Sir Hubert.’

‘And you, Cis?’ he asked, for he scarcely liked the flippant way in which she answered.

‘Oh, I am very fond of my husband, of course, as a good wife should be. Did not you instil high principles into me in old days? See, there is Sir Hubert, wondering at our long *tête-à-tête*—come and be introduced.’

‘No, this could never be little Cicely; and if so, why this rapid change? What could have occurred that in so short a space of time the coy shyness of the girl should give place to the off hand readiness of the woman?’

And as Mr. Burke made Sir Hubert's acquaintance he failed still more to discover a reason. If he had been a dashing chaffy young Guardsman she might have caught the vein of his humour and had the dew dashed off her petals ; but this reserved, intellectual, middle-aged man to have transformed her into what she now was—it was incredible. If Mr. Burke had had any means of ascertaining the truth, he might have learnt that Sir Hubert was as perplexed at the change in his wife as the Vicar could be. The fast manners of fashionable life were horribly catching, he was afraid ; and perhaps Algy was right—Lady Susan's influence was not the most refining. It was a pity, but what could he do ? Cicely must march with the times—anything was better than that she should look moped and bored.

Wiseacres as men think themselves, with

their causes and effects, what miserably blind dupes they not unfrequently are ! To a certain degree perhaps he was right though in his surmises. She had caught dash and learnt repartee from Lady Susan and Algy Duncombe, but without that motive which Sir Hubert failed to fathom, she would never have dreamed of utilising the knowledge she had acquired. Since the party in Dover Street a whole month had passed, and she had not again seen Harry Durant. What had become of him she knew not. Once since then Sir Hubert had mentioned having met him at a lawyer's chambers in London, but now even he seemed ignorant of his movements. True, everyone just at that time of year was moving about, which might account for his absence and silence, yet Cicely longed to see the dear familiar face again, and drooped at times almost perceptibly

under the armour of chaff and merry nonsense in which she sought so earnestly to encase herself. What should she do at Swinton, how bear up under Mrs. Bertrand's inquisitorial glances? Everything was so reminding, so painful, and neither Algy Duncombe nor Lady Susan would be there to help her with their merry talk. Algy of course was never invited since he had chosen to fall in love with May, and Lady Susan's acquaintance with Mrs. Bertrand was very slight, and one from which she shrank intuitively for herself and feared for Cicely.

‘Mind you don't come to grief, little one. That woman's cunning is as deep as a well, and I don't believe she loves you. What Sir Hubert wants to take you there for I can't think, nor, in fact, why she has asked you,’ had been Lady Sue's remark when she bid Cicely farewell.

‘Oh, I do so want to see dear old Swinton again.’

‘All right, and very sentimental and wise, I dare say, if you don’t have to pay for it.’

Cicely had only been four-and-twenty hours at Swinton, and was already beginning to pay for coming, if the utterly miserable state of her feelings was the coin in which payment was to be made. The day before, at the sight of the old lodge, she had cried till she was almost ashamed of appearing among the guests at dinner, and Sir Hubert had threatened to take her back forthwith to Campden Hill. No, it was evident she must battle with sentiment and laugh down despair—she would be very happy in the end, no doubt. Mrs. Fitzalan had long ago told her that feelings were ‘all nonsense.’

‘Play lawn tennis—of course she would.

She had not had much practice, so she must be forgiven if she played badly.'


And as once Cicely had been deemed the merriest spirit on the village green, so now Lady Fleming was the merriest spirit on Swinton lawn, and the joyous party of young people there assembled laughed again and again at her badinage and her jokes. Tomorrow would be the 1st of September, so it was the last day when the gentlemen might be expected to idle in the ladies' presence, and everyone seemed to be making the most of the occasion. Tea was at last brought out under the trees; and leaving their game for a while, they all grouped themselves round the table where Rose was the presiding deity. More 'guns' were to arrive by a train nearly due, and many were the speculations as to what they would be like, for Rose and May out of sheer fun declined to say who the

fresh guests were whom they were expecting. At last the sound of carriage-wheels is heard in the distance, and after a few minutes two men emerge from a side garden-door on to the lawn—Harry Durant and Mr. Seton.

‘Oh, Lady Fleming, I hope you have not spoiled your dress—I am afraid I touched your cup.’

‘Well, you *are* very awkward; but I think I upset the tea myself, so I’ll forgive you. There is not much harm done—my dress will wash.’

And in flapping the tea off her skirt with her handkerchief Cicely’s scarlet face escaped observation, while she inwardly thanked the young Oxonian who, all unwittingly, had come to her friendly succour. But if Cicely’s heart beat so wildly that she could almost hear its throbs at this unexpected meeting with



Mr. Durant, what his feelings were it is almost hopeless to depict.

Heaven only knew how carefully he had kept out of her way of late, and now to meet her here—it was a bad turn he had not deserved from fate. His uncle, in asking him to come and shoot, had spoken of a man's party only ; never for a moment had it occurred to him that the Flemings were likely to be present, or very certainly all the partridges in England would not have lured him. Sir Hubert greeted him most warmly, but Lady Fleming shook hands in silence. Chaff failed her, and a serious reception would have been madness.

Ah, Lady Susan little guessed how truly necessary had been her injunction to be careful ! If only she were there to help her now !

‘Thank goodness we shall be shooting

all day to-morrow, and the next morning I shall have letters imperatively recalling me to town,' Harry Durant had said to himself when he thought the matter over as he dressed for dinner, for up to this time Cicely had never addressed him, nor by word nor sign, save by that handshake, testified that she was aware he was near her. Truth to tell, she dared not trust herself—the startle his sudden appearance had given her had so upset her nerves that they were scarcely amenable to control. She must go to her room, take a 'calming draught,' and school herself before she could reassume the bantering manner which had proved so successful of late.

Another hour and they had all assembled in the drawing-room awaiting the announcement of dinner. Mr. Burke had been asked to dine ; so there was another pair of eyes

from whose gaze Cicely intuitively shrank. And yet she had done no wrong ; was, on the contrary, heartily and resolutely striving to do right, but fate was indeed against her too ; at least so she thought when Mr. Durant, by the desire of his aunt, gave her his arm and conducted her across the large hall into the dining-room. Cicely talked and laughed so freely and unreservedly that Mrs. Bertrand, ever ready to find fault, set her down as an exceedingly ' forward young person for one who had been so recently elevated to her present position.' Even she, inimical though she was, failed utterly to detect any symptoms of deeper feeling than mere acquaintance demands between the two whom she had placed together at the table, because perchance a rumour of past fondness had reached her, and she wished, with her usual inquiring habits, to discover the truth. Harry Durant,

though wishing himself ten thousand miles away, took his cue from Cicely and talked as gaily as she did. Yet how could they enjoy each other's society under the artillery of all those eyes watching for one little trip—trembling, too, in their hearts lest either should betray to the other any portion of those desperate inward workings? They chatted on on general subjects, steering very clear of all topics of personal interest—the old days at Swinton, Peter's death, the week spent at the Vicarage, were vividly in both their minds, though they were alluded to by neither. But the dinner was got through, as similar dinners have been got through before. Mr. Burke, from the fact of its being so new to him, was perhaps the only individual who was set wondering at Cicely's manner. The good, unsophisticated Vicar, buried in his country parish, failed totally to

comprehend how a few months' contact with the great outer world could so thoroughly and utterly change a woman.

'She is no longer the child she was when Peter died, eh, Harry? What does it all mean?' he said to Mr. Durant, when, the ladies having left the room, the two men found themselves side by side.

'Do you think the world stands still while you are dreaming here at Swinton?' asked Harry, laughing.

'No, not exactly; but why should Cicely change? Rose and May Bertrand have come back much as they left.'

'Milk-and-water fools, both of them!'

'So, so—then that marriage is not arranged yet?'

'And never will be on this side of time. Come, Burke, let us find a more amusing topic of conversation than matrimony. Di-

voice savours much more of the spirit of the day.'

'It is an evil day, my boy, as even I can hear from the stray bits of gossip that reach Swinton. You know I always disapproved most highly of that girl being taken away from this quiet village and plunged into the vortex of the great world. I hope she is as happy as she appears ; but I am inclined to doubt it.'

'Of all the hideous sounds of woe,
Worse than the screech-owl and the blast,
Is that portentous one, "I told you so,"'

Answered Durant, quoting Byron, with a gay laugh. 'She has a husband to take care of her—what more can you and I have to do with the matter?'

'Pooh, no one but Margaret Denham—for I will not call her by that other name—

would have married bright little Cis to such a Don Quixote as that.'

'He is a very good fellow, and a great friend of mine, though perhaps, as you say, rather a melancholy bird for Cicely; but I believe she likes him.'

Mr. Burke shrugged his shoulders. He was not at all convinced of that fact.

'If so it is well,' he answered; 'though what possessed you to insist on the girl being sent to that woman I cannot conceive. If I had not thought you intended to marry her yourself, and had therefore a right to interfere, I should far more strenuously have opposed the scheme.'

Mr. Durant knitted his brow angrily and took a peach from a dish in front of him.

'I don't think we either of us are entirely *au courant* with Margaret Denham's history,'

he said, after a short pause. 'But this is not the place to discuss it. We must have a talk and compare notes. If we had both been less reticent in the past, perhaps things would not have turned out as they are now.'

'I wrote to her more than six weeks ago, telling her I had those papers we found in the lodge which were marked to be given to her a year after the old man's death; but she has taken no notice of my letter.'

'Ah, I had forgotten all about them—she interests me but little. I have seen her though in London since that. She never mentioned having heard from you.'

'No, of course not—she was always secretive. Does the husband know who Cicely really is?'

'He knows, of course, what Mrs. Fitzalan chose to tell him. I had nothing to do

with the marriage—was laid up with a broken leg in England at the time.’

‘So, so, so—now I am beginning to see.’
And a sudden light stole over the Vicar’s face.

‘Come along, let us join the ladies and put off confidential talk till another time. I’ll come and dine with you in a day or two, if you will have me. They have lots of men here—they won’t miss me for once.’

‘With pleasure, my dear boy. I didn’t ask you because I thought your aunt would scold me for it.’

‘Oh, bother take her!’

Cicely was sitting apart from the others as they entered the room—she was turning over a large portfolio of drawings, looking very pale and listless. She had fought bravely all through dinner, and the effort had well-nigh expended her nervous strength.

Constant tension had rendered these delicate organs somewhat troublesome of late. It was the Vicar's privilege to talk to her to-night ; the child he had taught from infancy, and in whom he had taken so large a share of paternal interest, was going to devote herself to a good half-hour's chat with the worthy man. Yet woe to Cicely—the acting must recommence, she could not be simple, honest, and true, as her nature prompted—there were so many things she must not say, so many old memories to which she dared not allude. Once she had contemplated telling him everything ; but, good, kind man though he was, what could he do to help ? To drag another individual into the plot would only be to increase its intricacies. No, she must work her way through the labyrinth as best she could alone, and trust to heaven for guidance and support. So she made the

best of her talk with the Vicar—asked after all the old village friends from whom her life had now become so thoroughly estranged, and kept as clear as she could of reference to the vicissitudes through which she had passed since she left. During their conversation a servant had called Mr. Durant from the room, a circumstance which produced no especial comment, till some one at last observed that both he and Sir Hubert had been absent for a considerable time.

‘Looking after their guns,’ suggested one of the party. ‘Durant used to be a crack shot before he went sentimentalising in Italy.’

‘But Sir Hubert does not shoot at all,’ said Cicely, ‘and has not even brought a gun.’

‘Then perhaps they have gone for a walk—it is a very fine night. We ought all

of us to be out. Come and look at the moon, Miss Rose.' And Rose Bertrand and Mr. Seton stepped out on to the terrace.

Mrs. Bertrand had not yet discovered how much moonshine there was about Mr. Seton's prospects.

At this moment Harry Durant came back, and went straight up to Cicely.

'Your husband is not quite well, Lady Fleming; he would like you to come to him.'

'Ah, I will go directly—Sir Hubert is often ill. Did he ask you to fetch me?'

'He is in his dressing-room—his servant is with him. Shall I come with you?'

'Just as you like.' And she passed quickly out of the room.

No, verily she did not love Sir Hubert. The light manner told its own tale. Harry Durant followed her, merely saying, hurriedly as he did so—

‘Fleming is very seriously ill. I have sent for the nearest doctor, and telegraphed to town for his own physician.’

That she would be shocked and awed when she saw him Durant knew her kind heart too well to doubt, even if she had no latent affection for him—which he both hoped and believed she had—at all events he would not leave her to face the ordeal alone.

On the sofa in the dressing-room lay Sir Hubert. He had been struck down by a sudden fit, and was labouring back to consciousness as she entered.

CHAPTER II.

MISS WILSON.

‘It is very well to sing, and to be with swells, and to get on in life generally, but please, Meister, without seeming ungrateful, I should like to be back at my broom.’

Old Wurzel’s face was a study as Deb rushed into the music-room one morning and uttered these words.

‘Back to your broom, *Kind!* *Gott im Himmel!* what for you go back to your broom? Ah, the Herr, then, was right—he say let the child be.’

‘That’s just it; it’s because of the gen-

tleman. If I had stuck to my broom I never should have done no harm to he.'

'Harm, Deb? What mean you, *Kind*, what mean you?'

'Well, it's all along of that French party,' cried Deb, who, although she had begun to speak more correct English, yet lapsed strongly into the vernacular when excited. 'She has been a-wheedling and a-coaxing o' me, and got words out of me which I had sooner have had my tongue cut out of me than have uttered, if I had only known what a sly vixen she was.'

'I can this matter not comprehend—make it more clear.'

'Well, that there French Madame as was here, she has been a-rattling at Mr. Durant, telling him as he and Lady Fleming was too thick, and wants to drag me into it, just to separate me from my best friends—

she has got no other mortal end. Oh, she is a bad 'un, she is.'

'Ach, this is an imbroglio in which you should not mixed be. Neither I nor you understand these people's affairs. How comes to you this knowledge?'

'Well, she told it out clear and straight this morning her own blessed self. "Deb," says she, "you're a bad girl—you fetches and carries messages for Mr. Durant, and I'll tell the Meister; and it ain't true, sir, not a word of it. I never fetched nor carried no message for Mr. Durant but once, and that was ever so long ago, to a hideous old woman who lives down a back street, and I up at once and told her so. "And who was the woman? Tell me who the woman was," right off she says, "or I'll make the whole quarter too hot for you." Well, I told her she was nobody like worth having—

only a Miss Wilson, an old nurse or summut. "Where does she live?" she asks sharp. "Oh, in Clare Street. There, don't go for making mischief 'twixt me and my friends." "Just what I wants to know—it's the precious^{est} bit of information I have had this many a day," says she. "Didn't I come to London to look for her? And to find her that promiscuous like is luck, sure enough." And now whatever I am to do I don't know.'

'I see not, child—I see not such great complication.'

'Didn't he tell me to say nothing, and haven't I gone just contrary to his orders? And won't more mischief than one can count come of it? And that I hadn't left my broom at all, but just stuck to the sweepin', I wish with all my heart.'

'Does this Madame know this Miss Wilson?'

‘Drat her, she knows a vast deal more than she has a right to know. I wish she had stayed in France before she came a-meddling with me.’

‘She has from here gone—you will see her again no more. Gretchen has received money for her stay, and an hour since she departed with her box.’

‘Oh, I know—I saw her off—but she is a-going to see Miss Wilson ; and if there ain’t a row ! Dear heart, whatever shall I do ?’ And Deb began to howl in a manner which both perplexed and terrified the old German.

‘*Kind, Kind*, this is not to be tolerated. Let us make melody and forget the small miseries of life.’

‘Bah !’ cried Deb, looking up fiercely. ‘I have no patience for music now. I am that vexed I could kill myself. Whatever to do I don’t know. I’ll go straight off


round to Mr. Durant's rooms and tell him the whole story. That is the only way as I see clear.'

'Round to the gentleman's rooms! But, *Kind*, this is not seeming in a modest maiden.'

'Lor' bless ye, Meister, I am only a gutter-child. Nobody ever meddles with me. And the month is up long ago since I promised not to wander. I couldn't settle down nohow if I hadn't made a clean breast of the whole matter.'

'Where is my Gretchen?' asked the German, who was thoroughly perplexed by the nomadic, restless spirit of the girl.

'Oh, she is out—so now is my time; for if she once hears of the matter she'll be sure to have some sensible saw that will only irritate me. Let me go, Meister—let me go; and I'll promise if I only get this



business off my hands to settle in quite comfortable like, and never want to tramp any more.'

'Ach, well, you shall follow your mind ; only promise to be good for ever hereafter.'

'With all my heart,' she cried, kissing the old man, as was her wont when he did anything to please her ; and in another three minutes she had tied on her bonnet and left him to smoke the calumet of peace while he pondered over the impracticability of seeking to manage and guide a woman.

'Mr. Durant had left for Swinton Hall only two hours ago.' This was the information which awaited Deb when she reached his lodgings. Language more characteristic than refined fell from her pretty lips as the grumpy old landlady vouchsafed the intelligence. She turned sharply to go away, when she nearly fell into the arms of Algy

Duncombe, who, like herself, had come to inquire for Harry Durant. On more than one occasion she had seen him at Lady Fleming's; and while Algy had been amused by the girl's quaintness, she on her part had been attracted by his chaffy, offhand manner.

‘Hullo,’ he said, ‘Miss Deb! Durant is in luck when he receives visits from you!’

‘He is out, away from town; and that isn't luck when I want to speak to him,’ she answered, shortly.

‘What is to command? Can I be of any service to you?’ he asked, laughing.

‘You!’ And there was a sort of sneer in her tone. She changed it, however, and said, musingly, ‘I am in a terrible bother. I wonder if you could help me?’

‘I thought you were in comfortable

quarters at the German's Art School. You surely have not left there?'

'Oh, no; it is nothing of that sort—something about Mr. Durant and Lady Fleming. I wonder if you are to be trusted?'

'With anything concerning them, certainly. He is one of my greatest friends; she and I are like brother and sister.'

'Hurrah! Then you are just the man. Shouldn't wonder if you knew the French party as was lodging at our school—leastwise I don't believe she is French, only she calls herself Madame Alan.'

Algy Duncombe gave a long whistle.

'Shouldn't wonder if I did,' he said, laughing. 'Go on; tell me all about it. What mischief has she been hatching?'

'Well, she's going to tell Mr. Durant as I said they was lovers, they two; and

wants to make out as I have been a fetchin' and carryin' for them ; and it ain't a bit true, is it, sir ?'

'Not a word of truth in it, I should say, decidedly. If she is the individual I imagine her to be she is capable of inventing any lie to serve her own ends.'

'And you'll tell Mr. Durant that I ain't to blame—that I haven't done no harm ?'

'Why, he will only laugh at the whole story. It is too absurd. But look here, Miss Deb : you must not go about repeating it, or people will fancy it is true.'

'To think as I should demean myself by doing such a thing except to a friend of the family like yourself ! But you will explain it, sir, won't you ?'

'Yes, certainly, when I fully understand it myself. This French Madame is at your house, you say ?'

‘Not now. She went some weeks ago to nurse a sick friend. All on a sudden like, to-day, she came for her things and is off altogether.’

As he remembered his walk with the Grey Widow, Algy went into fits of laughter, which irritated Deb, inclined as she was to regard the whole affair most seriously.

‘Well, I can’t waste time talking,’ she said, ‘specially as I don’t see that it’s a subject for grinning.’

‘Forgive me, Miss Deb, I beg of you. If you knew as many of the ins and outs as I do you would not be able to resist a smile. Where has this charming lady gone? She always wore grey, I think?’

‘Grey or black,’ answered Deb; ‘she had grey on to-day, and looked that trim and neat, if I hadn’t been rare and cross I should have admired her.’



‘It was to-day, then, that you and she had this conversation?’

Deb nodded her head.

‘But you have not heard the worst,’ she went on; ‘there’s more behind, only I am afraid of telling you.’

‘Half-confidences invariably lead to mischief, Miss Deb. If you want me to do any good, you must tell me the whole.’

‘Well, I suppose it is the only thing as can be done,’ she murmured, musingly; and then she gave him all the information she possessed about Miss Wilson.

Algy Duncombe was rather perplexed how to act. He did not wish to appear as though he were prying into his friend Durant’s affairs, but at the same time he felt that some immediate steps should be taken to ascertain what use Mrs. Fitzalan was going to make of the information Deb had so unguardedly given her.


‘Come with me; we will go to Clare Street at once,’ he said, after a few seconds of deliberation.

‘Oh, I never can face that surly old party again,’ she exclaimed.

‘At all events we can go into the street. It may not be necessary to go into the house.’

‘Well, come on; though I can’t see as we shall do anything except make matters worse by interfering.’

So they started together; and a singularly assorted pair they were. Algy was got up in Poole’s last fashion, though London was at its flattest, and he would not have been in town save for sundry disappointments, which had caused his country visits not to fit; while Deb, in her quaintly-cut garments which bore such unmistakeable trace of Gretchen’s scissors,



looked rather like the show-girl from a country village, dressed by the charity of the Lady Bountiful. But they talked volubly and intimately, notwithstanding their disparity of appearance. Algy's frank open-heartedness put Deb entirely at her ease, and from her remarks he gathered that there was, perhaps, more reason for Mrs. Fitzalan's insinuations than he had at first suspected.

‘Beast!’ he muttered to himself, ‘if she knew the girl cared for Durant why did she let her marry Fleming?’

‘That is the house; but I ain’t a-going in; so what you brought me here for I can’t say,’ remarked Deb, coming to a dead stop at the corner of Clare Street.

‘Oh, indeed!’ he answered. ‘Well, do you know, I, on the contrary, have rather a fancy to make the acquaintance of this Miss

Wilson. But I would not take you in on any account. Pray don't be alarmed. You can be useful though, if you don't mind. Just keep watch, and if the Grey Widow should appear, don't let her surprise me ; try and keep her in check until I have finished my visit. I'll look out of the window occasionally, to see if the coast is clear. . It is a front room, is it not ? '

' Yes, that one up there. Gracious ! what a spree ! Whatever are you going to say ? '

' Never mind ; you play your part, I'll play mine. I love an adventure above everything in life.'

He rang the bell as he spoke, and the same slatternly girl with whom Deb had made acquaintance in times past opened the door.

' I think you have a lodger of the name



of Wilson ; will you kindly tell her I wish to speak to her on business ? ’

The girl let him into the dark passage and went up with the message, treating him much more politely than she had done Deb when she had gone there at Mr. Durant’s bidding.

‘ Miss says if you beant one of the Swell Mob you may come up,’ was the answer, given with a grin, which made some very white teeth conspicuous in contrast to a black-leaded face.

‘ Not having the slightest connection with the firm, I will come up with pleasure,’ said Algy, laughing ; and in another minute he found himself face to face with the grim old lady who had so frightened Deb. She attempted to rise as he entered.

‘ Pray, madam, I entreat you, do not move. Allow me to place myself a chair

close to you, as I fancy a few minutes' conversation may be interesting to both of us.'


'Really, sir, I have not the honour of your acquaintance.'

'Just so, my dear lady ; but I trust you are about to make it, since your visiting list embraces the names of one or two of my intimate friends.'

'My visiting list ! Bless the man, why, I never get off this sofa !'

'So I regret to learn ; yet people visit you, as I am doing to day—Durant, for instance, both came and sent to you, not many months ago.'

'It is little enough as I have seen of Mr. Durant—would have been better, perhaps, for some folks if I had seen more. He did come to me ; but I have had no tidings of him since, which is queer, considering. Did he send you here, sir ?'



‘To tell the truth honestly, he did not. He is not in London, but circumstances have come to my knowledge which made me think a talk with you might not be altogether disadvantageous. You are acquainted with the name of Fitzalan?’

She looked at him keenly for a second; then she said, with a little gasp—

‘You ain’t the child, are you?’

Algy Duncombe smiled. What child she meant he could not in the least imagine; but that he was not that child he felt very sure; so he shook his head.

‘Ah, no, of course not; it was a girl, and you are too old. I don’t know what I am saying.’ And she passed her hand across her brow, as though to help her memory. ‘I wish I had never known anything about it—it is so worriting. Better to be a pauper than to lead an easy life with

other folks' secrets always dangling at your heels.'

'Now for a bold plunge,' thought Algy. 'If I don't take a header into the mystery I shall never make anything of this woman.' Then, aloud, 'Are you aware that Mrs. Fitzalan is in London?'

'Her that is dead and gone—or her that is alive and well?' she asked, wildly.

'Well, not having had any communication with spirits myself, I should imagine it is the latter.' And Algy smiled. 'She has been seeking for your address, and has only discovered it to-day.'

'She'd put some poison in that there teapot and send me into the next world as soon as look at me,' said the old woman, pointing to a brown hardware teapot which stood on the hob.

'Should not be surprised in the least,

was her companion's reassuring reply. 'But forewarned is forearmed, they say—don't let her find you.'

'Lor' bless ye, Mr. What-ever-is-your-name, I can't go worritin' out of here—they must just do their worst among them—but whatever I was made a victim for I can't think.'

'It is mighty unpleasant for you; but what shall we do?' said Algy, getting up and taking a turn to the window, to have a look at Deb.

'I am afeard of that woman, I am. She Mrs. Fitzalan, indeed! Why, she can't hold a candle to her as is gone. Still I am afeard of her, and I am getting old and helpless. Mr. Durant says I have acted a base, unprincipled part, he calls it. Perhaps I have; but what was I to do? No one was there to


guide me, so I just did what she and the Frenchman told me.'

'And now?' asked Algy, still looking out of the window, and not being altogether able to arrive at what it all meant.

'Well, I put the whole thing in Mr. Durant's hands a few months back, and not another word have I heard since.'

'And suppose you have a visit from Mrs. Fitzalan?'

'I don't much think as she'll come here—she ain't fond of looking at me—I know too much. If she do she'll offer me money to hold my tongue, and I shall tell her that Mr. Durant has promised to double her offers if I speak up honestly when the time comes; and as for the proofs, he has got them long ago. But, Lord, sir, it is that bamboozling I wish I was out of it.'



‘Stick to Durant, my good Miss Wilson—he is as true as steel. So you think this Mrs. Fitz—I forget her real name—will not pay you a visit?’

‘Margaret Denham, sir, that is her name. Her father was lodge-keeper at Swinton Park, Bertrands’ place, for ever so many years. She was always intriguing and ambitious from the very first, when she went to be governess to the Vicar’s children—them as is all lying in the graveyard now. She was turned away from there for her flaunty ways. People do say that in those days she set her cap at Mr. Durant himself, and——’

‘Stop, Miss Wilson; I have already told you that Mr. Durant is an intimate friend of mine. I do not wish to pry into the details of his past life; I merely came to warn you that you might expect ere long a com-

munication from this woman, and to put you on your guard. Having accomplished this part of my mission, I will write to Durant and let him decide on what is next to be done.'

Easy-going and fond of frolic though he was, conscientious scruples had assailed Algy when he found that, partly out of fun, he had thrust himself into the midst of a mystery which probably Durant would not care for him to unravel; and though burning with curiosity to discover by what means the Grey Widow had assumed the right of taking the name of Fitzalan, he resolved to beat a graceful and honourable retreat; so he won the old lady's heart by his pretty speeches, promised to come and see her again when he had heard from his friend, and joined Deb at the corner of the street, without trusting himself to ask any

farther questions, muttering, however, as he walked along—

‘Lodge-keeper to the Bertrands! How comes it Mrs. B. did not recognise her? So, so—is sweet Cis her daughter, after all? Never—that is quite impossible. By Jove, it is a terrible hash—I wonder how it will all end?’

CHAPTER III.

AT BREAK OF DAY.

‘Do not leave me, Durant. To you alone I can speak unreservedly of my affairs. You will take care of Cicely if I die—promise me.’

‘Aye, aye, man—it is all right. Don’t worry about affairs; they will come square; only make haste and get well.’

Then there was a silence, and the grey morning began to dawn into the room where the sick man lay, nursed so carefully by him who had appointed himself as watcher during the long hours of the night. Several days had passed since Sir Hubert

had been taken ill, and the doctors had declared the case to be not hopeless, though they had enjoined perfect quiet. All the household save Durant had gone to bed—even Cicely. She had begged very hard to be allowed to remain with Sir Hubert, but Durant had looked at her pale, almost haggard, face—for mental excitement was already setting its stamp even on that young brow—and had insisted that she should take at least an hour or two of repose, especially as for the last two nights while her husband had been ill, she had resolutely refused to leave him.

‘Don’t go away, Durant—stay with me—are you still there?’ Sir Hubert had again muttered brokenly after a long pause.

He did not ask for Cicely, but for Durant. It was clear that the lawsuit and money difficulties weighed heavily on his mind as he lay there; and he leant on the

strong man's succour to help him and to shield his young wife from embarrassment if the worst should befall. A trying position for Durant, but one nevertheless that he resolved to face unflinchingly and sustain with honour. As he sat there alone during the watches of the still night, thoughts crowded on him apace and good and evil angels seemed battling as it were for empire. The stumbling-blocks in honour's path were multitudinous, the complications which surrounded him varied and incessant, each one seeming to drag him into a dangerous byeway with a force more resistless than its predecessor. Yet for all that Harry Durant's good angels did not desert him. For Cicely's sake he must fight and conquer as a brave man should. That he is heavily weighted there is little doubt, especially as at this moment he sees her sweet face with

its lustrous eyes peeping in at the half-open door, asking him, with an inquiring glance, if all goes well in the darkened chamber. He rises and goes forward to speak to her, imagining Sir Hubert to be asleep.

‘Not going, Durant?—don’t go,’ once more pleaded the voice from the bed.

‘Only for a second, to speak to Cicely.’

‘Ah, poor Cis! Yes, comfort poor Cis.’

Mr. Durant went out into the gallery on which the room opened. She was standing there wrapped in her quilted silken dressing-gown, the pale morning breaking in at the window over her head.

‘Is Sir Hubert going to die? Oh, tell me, please, Mr. Durant.’

‘I hope not. But should you be so very sorry, Cis?’

‘I should never forgive myself,’ she answered. ‘I have not been half good and

kind enough to him. Oh, pray that he may live, Mr. Durant, and that I may, if possible, retrieve the past.'

'You are tired and feverish, my poor child, and magnify your very venial sins far beyond their actual demerits.'

'Oh, don't talk to me like that; you don't know how wicked my thoughts have been sometimes—God grant you never may. If Sir Hubert dies I will go right away into some distant land, and no one shall ever hear of me again.'

'My dear Cis, if you excite yourself like this I shall have to send you right away. Fleming is progressing favourably towards recovery. It will only retard its progress if he sees you thus.'

'But he is not here; he cannot hear what we are saying, and I am so very miserable I don't know what to do.'

‘Go back to bed and get a few hours’ sleep. Now, if ever, a dose of chloral would be permissible.’

‘I have taken it till it has no more effect than water,’ she answered while the wild look in her eyes quite startled him. ‘If Sir Hubert dies I should like to die too.’

‘Poor child, do you care for him so very dearly?’

Was the tone one of regret or of pity which rang in Mr. Durant’s voice? She turned away as she answered it.

‘He cared for me, and when he has gone there will be no one on the earth who loves me.’

‘Cicely! how dare you utter such words, when you know I have loved you as no man ever loved woman before?’

She hid her face and sobbed.

‘Not now—don’t tell me that now. The

past can never come back—you once said so yourself.’

‘The past ! Our lives are not past—our love is not past. What do you mean ?’

‘That your words are madness, Mr. Durant, and that my sin becomes tenfold every instant that I stand here and listen to them.’

She raised her head and looked at him clear and full with her bright eyes. He turned abashed from their gaze.

‘Forgive me,’ he said, meekly. ‘Your trouble, your forlorn state, made me forget myself. Heaven knows I too have striven to be true and honest.’

‘We will help each other, as good friends should,’ she said, holding out her hand to him. ‘I dare not blame you for a sin which lies so heavily on my own heart.’

He kissed the cold hand reverently and held it for some moments in his own.

‘Durant, are you there? Why do you stay away so long?’ It was the sick man’s voice that startled him.

‘Go back to bed, my child, and trust to me to do the best for Fleming. You will trust me, will you not?’

‘With everything I possess—even that which is dearest to me on earth—my fair name,’ she replied, unhesitatingly.

He only pressed her hand for answer as he repassed into Sir Hubert’s room; but he registered a vow that more than ever he would keep guard over his looks and words, lest sign or breath from him should injure the untarnished reputation she had committed to his keeping.

‘What were you and Cis talking about? Why does she not come here?’ were the querulous questions with which he was received.



‘I have sent Lady Fleming to bed—her nerves are quite unstrung by sitting up so much. I will stay with you till she has had a rest.’

‘But then you will not go away altogether?’

‘No, not altogether—not if you want me, that is to say.’

‘Of course I want you. Who is to arrange all that miserable business but you? I believe you talk of going away on purpose to thwart me.’

‘My dear fellow, do keep your mind at rest. I will do all that is necessary; but the Courts do not open till November. You will be in your old form long before then.’

‘Never, Durant, never—you will have to look after my poor little Cis before you expect. I wonder if she would miss me much? I have often thought I was too old

for her ; yet I have tried to be good to her and considerate of her youth.'

Frenzied almost to madness, Durant answered perhaps more sharply than exactly befitted the circumstances.

'My dear man, this is too maudlin. For goodness' sake drop sentiment. Get well as fast as you can, and leave the rest to luck. Lady Fleming has no fancy for widowhood yet awhile—she told me so just now.'


'Then she would be sorry if I died? Poor Cis!'

'Look here, Fleming : if you are going on talking, instead of trying to compose yourself, I shall leave the room. A man who gives himself no chance of getting better is committing an act of moral suicide. I'll do the best I can for you and your affairs ; only for gracious' sake be quiet.'

Thus adjured, Sir Hubert was forced to lapse into silence and leave the subject which was driving Harry Durant to the last extremity of bewilderment.

Once more quietude reigned in the sick room, and Durant's thoughts 'ran on at will,' wandering among such endless labyrinths of dark fancies and perplexing torments that it seemed as though they never could emerge into the bright sunshine of the clear sky.

Life again became instinct in the hushed house, yet no farther words had the two men spoken. Sir Hubert had sunk into an uneasy slumber, while the other with wide open eyes sat and glared at the familiar objects round, as though quite lost to all cognisance of mere actual and material form and presence; and when Sir Hubert's servant came at last with some tea for his



master, it was with a painful and almost impossible effort that Durant shook off his waking nightmare and sought to grasp the meaning of commonplace sentences and expressions. A cold bath and a hasty rush out into the fresh air must serve him instead of sleep, for to coax a visit from the poppy-crowned god would, he well knew, prove utterly abortive. It was by no means the first time in his life that for various causes he had passed a night without going to bed, yet never before had it told so heavily upon him. He heard the breakfast-bell ring as he was wandering in the grounds, and joined the assembled guests before they were seated at the table. Numerous were the inquiries after Sir Hubert, whose sudden illness had cast such a gloom over a cheery party.

‘Oh, he is better—is not going to make


a die of it this time, so no one need be inconvenienced. The usual amusements may go on.'

This was hopeful intelligence, especially to Mrs. Bertrand, who was singularly unsympathising in illness and trouble, and had almost made up her mind to go off bag and baggage and leave the Flemings undisputed sway in the establishment.

'Well, that is good hearing, particularly for you, Harry, for I never saw anyone look so ill in my life—we shall have you on our hands next.' .

'Oh, I shall get some sleep to-night. If Fleming continues better Burke has offered to sit up with him.'

'And her ladyship—what is her ladyship about? Why does she not sit up herself? A young girl like that sleeping in her bed when other people are making themselves



quite ill! I have no patience with such women.'

The hot colour spread itself over Durant's brow as he longed to defend Cicely from this unjust attack; but he dared not, and at this moment the door opened and she herself came into the room. If an ashen pallor and large black circles round her eyes betokened what is called a 'good night's rest,' Cicely showed the signs palpably. As it was she was received with a little cry, for no one there failed to note the change that had come over her since they had seen her only yesterday, and the heart of the strong man quailed as Durant looked at her. While the others were profuse in their regrets that she should have thought it necessary to come down, and offers of a comfortable chair, breakfast, etc., were going on all round, he neither spoke nor stirred, but only looked at Cicely, and

bit his moustache nervously. She was very calm and composed, and grateful for everyone's kindness ; hoped Sir Hubert was really a very little better, sipped her coffee, played with her toast without eating it, and was as totally unlike the dashing Cicely of the last few weeks as though she had exchanged idiosyncrasies with some of her companions. Mrs. Bertrand was amazed. She had never given her credit for liking aught in connection with Sir Hubert save his position, and this sort of tacit declaration of her love for him was now more than she could comprehend. No one, luckily, read between the lines save Harry Durant himself. As he thought of their meeting in the grey morning, and remembered how he had passed through a lifetime since that hour, he was fully capable of guessing the whole truth when he gazed on Cicely's suffering face.

‘I must go back to Sir Hubert,’ she said at last. ‘And he bade me ask you to come presently, Mr. Durant. He has some letters he wants you to write for him.’

They were the first words she had addressed to Durant. He only bowed his head in answer, and she was gone, leaving the assembled society, after the fashion of gossiping coteries, to discuss her appearance and her feelings from each individual’s own particular view of the subject. Harry Durant endured the painful ordeal of listening to these haphazard remarks, this flippant conversation, patiently, and after awhile rose, with a little sigh as of relief. He had accomplished his object and ascertained that no one there suspected the real state of affairs, nor had any idea of linking his name with that of the young wife who had just gone upstairs to sit by her husband’s bed of pain.

All the men were going to shoot except Mr. Seton, who was playing the devoted to Rose—or her money-bags—and had offered to drive the young ladies to an old castle about five miles off, where they would carry luncheon for the ‘shooters.’

‘Would Cousin Harry come?’

‘No, that was quite out of the question. He had letters to write for Fleming, and after that should try and get a sleep. What was his aunt going to do?’

Mrs. Bertrand was going out, of course. When was she ever known to let the doves out of her sight?

‘Then there would be nothing to disturb his slumbers—not even a laugh or a sneeze—quite a quiet house. The smoking-room sofa, with a pipe—that would be about the correct thing,’ he imagined.

‘Nasty, horrid, dirty habit!’ remarked

his aunt's incisive voice. 'When was he going to give it up?'

'Give up tobacco! "*Dieu nous a donné le tabac pour endormir nos douleurs et nos passions*"—at least so Balzac says. At all events, tobacco is to men what nagging is to women: when they give up the one I'll think about giving up the other.'

With all his troubles Harry Durant had not become so thoroughly pulseless and inert that he had not sufficient strength left to fire a shot at his dear aunt.

'Really, Harry, I wish you would be more careful; your conversation is not fit for the girls,' she retorted, frowning at the doves for laughing at Cousin Harry's little joke. 'Go and see that the luncheon-basket is properly packed, Rose; you have dawdled over your breakfast quite long enough.'

'Thus, as is of familiar every-day occur-

rence, the platitudes of life mix themselves up inextricably with the graver and more important stakes which lie hidden among the rubbish that envelopes them.' So Harry Durant thought as he strode across the hall away upstairs once more into that darkened room where Cicely sat in shadow watching, her husband's hand lying peacefully in hers.

'Well, old fellow, you are ever so much better ; we shall have you on your legs again in a day or two,' were the cheery words with which Durant greeted his friend. 'What is it I can do for you ?'

'Write and ask Hawkstone to come down. I should like to make my will.'

'Pooh, nonsense ; wait till you can go to him. It is absurd perplexing your head with all this business.'

'Nay, don't thwart me, Durant. I shall be easier if I have my way.'



‘All right, then, you shall not be contradicted for the world. What next?’

‘After you have written that and another letter or two, of which I will give you the particulars presently, I want you to take this little woman for a walk. Even in this faint light I can see she looks quite ill from being shut up in this close room.’

Cicely gave a little gasp.

‘Oh, Sir Hubert, who will look after you if I go out?’

‘I shall sleep a little presently, I make no doubt; and Louis is very attentive.’

‘Perhaps Lady Fleming would enjoy her walk more if I remained with you—she would not be so anxious,’ suggested Durant.

‘No, no, no; a cheery companion will do her as much good as the fresh air. How perverse you both are this morning! you contradict me in everything.’



They looked at each other, these two,
and Cicely said, softly—

‘We will go, dear Sir Hubert, if you
wish it.’

CHAPTER IV.

THE MILL-DAM.


HARRY DURANT exchanged his pipe and his nap for a walk with Cicely in the bright autumn sunshine. They wandered along listlessly without speaking; both were wearied and exhausted from the mental and physical strain which had been put on them of late. Old haunts too had their influence, for there was not one of nature's pictures, not a tree, not a square inch of ground, which was not thoroughly engraved on each mind. Neither asked the other where they should go, but to the old mill did intuition seem to lead them. For Cicely it had

fewer memories than for Durant, yet they had strolled there together before, and it had been Old Peter's favourite walk. Across the running water, about five hundred yards from the mill, there was a rustic bridge, athwart which a weeping willow cast its friendly shade—there they lingered for awhile, listening to the sounding stream, watching the sunshine on the ripples. No more dangerous talk had been indulged in; what little they had said, had been about the still life which was around them, rather than of their own shares in the busier life of action which lay beyond. For some moments they stood on the little bridge, while naught broke the silence save the babbling river and the wood-pigeon in the adjoining wood cooing to its mate. Neither dared give utterance to inward thought, yet the sympathy which reigned in that un-

broken silence was as perfect as the harmony which dwelt in the scene on which they gazed. Could world-warfare, passions, jealousies, taint so heaven-breathing an atmosphere, so calm and beautiful a repose? Truly they did not exist in those hearts, which only longed for peace, and that strength might be given them out of the mystic life to withstand the temptations by which they were so sorely assailed. Yet the wild beasts seeking whom they may devour were prowling even in that fair Eden-land, and they were no harmonious accents in which Mr. Durant ejaculated on a sudden—

‘By heaven, here! Fate is too remorseless.’

Cicely looked up at him in astonishment, then turned her eyes where his were angrily directed.



‘Mrs. Fitzalan!’ she cried, half-glad to see her friend again—half-sorry that anyone from the world should have come to dispel the dream in which she had been dwelling for the last half-hour.

‘Ah, you did not expect me here; and truth to say I was as little prepared to meet you—together, too.’ And she laughed gaily.

‘Sir Hubert has been very ill—perhaps you have heard—and as we are both tired out with nursing he asked Mr. Durant to bring me for a little walk.’

‘*Qui s’excuse, s’accuse,*’ said Mrs. Fitzalan, still laughing. ‘So you have been sharing the task of nursing the husband—very pretty occupation, upon my word, and one in which I doubt not you are both adepts.’

The scarlet colour mantled Cicely’s pale face, but she only said, quietly—

‘Please don’t be unkind and cross to me.

I have often wished for you and asked for you. Are you not glad to see me again? Why did you come here without——'

But, at a fierce, imperative interruption from Harry Durant, the sentence remained unfinished.

'Is this meeting premeditated or accidental?' he asked Mrs. Fitzalan.

'What a stupid question!' she answered. 'How could I possibly know that chance would lead your footsteps to the mill-dam?'

'The devil seems to assist you to track my steps in a way you could never do unless you were his ally. Woman, I tell you I will have no more of it. Leave me a free agent to manage my affairs as I will, or take the consequences of your interference.'

'Brave man though you may be, your words are bigger than your actions,' she replied, with a sneer.

Harry Durant's self-control was very nearly exhausted—if she had only been a man, that he might have struck her! As it was he was powerless, and as he looked at her his eyes gleamed with fury, and the veins swelled about his temples till they stood out in large knots.

Cicely, terror-stricken, laid her hand pleadingly on his arm. ‘Oh, don’t, please don’t say or do anything dreadful. Let us go away—Sir Hubert will be already wondering where we are all this long time.’

‘There is a dear little wheedling darling, coax him into pretty behaviour, and remind him that the husband must be kept in good humour.’

There was no occasion for Mr. Durant's resentment; all the latent fire which exists in every woman's nature, ready to burn fiercely when her self-respect is wounded,

was aglow in an instant as Cicely turned on Mrs. Fitzalan at this speech.

‘How dare you speak to me in that tone? By what right am I to be insulted by you? I have to thank you for charity in past days, and God knows I would not be ungrateful or forget your kindness; but I demand to be told at once what I have done to merit this injurious language?’

‘So, so, my Lady Fleming, you are on the high ropes are you? With all your fine words you *do* seem to forget though that I lent you the hand which mounted you.’

‘It is false!’ struck in Durant, fiercely. ‘Cicely is indebted to you for nothing—all you have in the world of right belongs to——’

‘Stop!’ she cried, interrupting him. ‘Has the final step been taken between you two; does the world know of your *liaison*, that

you are so ready with these rash assertions ?’

Would he not have felled her with a blow, and seen her body float down the tranquil stream, had he dared? Ah, Mrs. Fitzalan was reaping her full quota of revenge now, with that aggravating woman’s tongue of hers doing deadlier mischief than even weapons of warfare could have effected. What could he say, what do? He turned and gazed on Cicely’s scared white face with a look of pitying anguish.

‘Take me back to my husband, Mr. Durrant,’ she had said, in that dead-calm tone which was like some one speaking in a dream. The full force of Mrs. Fitzalan’s last words had scarcely reached her yet—only stunned her by their coarse virulence.

‘Back to your husband, poor fool! If he had known how to keep his own I should

scarcely have selected him for your mate. And he thinks himself secure in your love and Harry Durant's friendship. I am sorry for him, for I have no grudge against him; but sooner or later he must know the truth.'

'Oh! Mrs. Fitzalan, how can you talk thus? I have tried to be true and faithful to him, God is my judge.'

'Lady Fleming, for mercy's sake do not attempt to vindicate yourself against accusations which are utterly baseless. Mrs. Fitzalan and I must settle this matter later. Let me escort you back to the house.'

'Perhaps I had better return alone,' was Cicely's low answer; 'only I am afraid of what may happen here.'

Mrs. Fitzalan laughed.

'Don't be afraid, dear; I will not harm

him He knows the deep regard in which I have always held him.'

'Come, Lady Fleming, this interview must cease.' And he took her tenderly by the hand and led her a few paces off. 'As for you, Margaret, we shall meet again.'

'No,' she said, 'we have no farther scores to settle. I have given the Roland for your Oliver, and shall be in London before the afternoon is out.'

Mr. Durant did not answer her, but walked on with Cicely, whose excited state filled him with trouble and anxiety. She was sobbing convulsively as she clung to his arm; and what could he say to comfort her—poor stricken child? Ah, how deep-rooted and remorseless had been Mrs. Fitzalan's vengeance when she struck him through her!

'Let me go away—let me go away for

ever. I shall never bear to look anyone in the face again after this, Sir Hubert least of all. Oh! I can never see him.'

'My dearest Cicely, you have done no harm. You must not heed that vile woman's mad words.'

'No harm!' she echoed drearily. 'How can you say there is no harm? Have I not sworn to love one man while my heart was filled with love for another? It is useless playing with the subject; do we not both know it—too well—too well!'

Harry Durant's brow was crimson. He was an honest and an honourable man; but who can always and altogether withstand the promptings of the flesh? He bent his head and kissed the tear-stained face. She did not resist him—did not turn from him angrily—only said, in low accents, 'I am Sir Hubert Fleming's wife, and you have pro-

mised to guard my honour and help me to be true to him.'

Her words, appealing as they did to his higher nature, had a surer effect than wrath would have commanded.

'My child, what can I do?' he asked.

'Leave me for ever,' was the prompt reply; 'or rather stay here and nurse Sir Hubert, while I go back to town.'

'Cicely, such a scheme would be madness. The whole house would echo with talk about it.'

'I care not. I must go. I could not look Sir Hubert in the face with that woman's words ringing in my ears. I must go away somewhere—I care not whither. Oh, let me go, Mr. Durant—let me go. Lady Susan will take care of me.'

'Ah!' he said, in a tone of relief. 'She

is a loyal friend. But, Cicely, what will Fleming say? What will the Bertrands think?’

‘I care not; only let me go. It will be worse to stay here, for I feel I shall betray myself.’

‘My poor, poor child! and to think that I am powerless to help you; I who love you better than my life! Curse that woman and her wiles; they have brought misery and destruction to us both. By heaven, if——’

‘Hush, hush; please do not talk wildly, dear. Only let me go away somewhere to die in peace.’

‘You to die, my darling Cicely; and I, who had hoped to make your life one long, bright dream!’

‘Brightness and dreams have faded away for ever,’ she said, shivering. ‘And, oh! I

am so dreadfully afraid of the reality I have to face—all alone, too.'

'Cicely, do you want to drive me quite mad?'

'No, dear; only to remind you of what *must* be, for I do not think you either see or understand it quite. Let me go right away, please. I shall be better when I have got away from the place where I have heard those dreadful words. Oh, can I ever forget them!' And once again her frame shook with that hysterical weeping, every sob of which was a dagger plunged in Durant's heart.

'I have done no very grievous sin; why should I be made to suffer thus?' she wailed. 'She persuaded me to marry Sir Hubert, and I thought I should have liked him; and so I should if——'

'If I had not crossed your path again,'

he said, bitterly. 'Ah, Cicely, would I had died before I had brought misery to you.'

'Poor dear—poor dear—you could not help it. We were both powerless; only, at whatever cost, we must part now. You will arrange it for me, will you not?'

'My child, I will do everything that man can do to shield and save you.'

'And I will trust you to the end.'

Then for many minutes they walked on without speaking, she still leaning on the strong arm without which her feeble steps would have tottered, her strength probably have altogether failed. Arrived at the little wood, they paused awhile. She could go no farther without rest, so she sat on a fallen tree, looking more as if she were the spirit of the place than human flesh and blood; he stood at a short distance and watched her. He was racking his brain to devise

some plan to help, but each one as it presented itself proved futile. He felt utterly miserable, but he dared not speak his thoughts, for his words would only breathe of a mad passion, and would shock and wound her.

A sound as of some one among the under-wood made Cicely, whose nerves were wildly uncontrollable, start to her feet.

‘Is *she* coming again? Oh, let us go quickly!’

The form that emerged from among the trees was, however, that of a man.

‘Burke!’ cried Mr. Durant, feeling that perhaps some help might be obtained from the friendly Vicar, though his impulse was by no means to confide to him or anyone the real state of the case.

‘I am glad I have found you,’ said the worthy pastor. ‘I have been up to the

House to see Sir Hubert, and on my way back I met Margaret—the so-called Mrs. Fitzalan. She told me my presence was needed here.’

Durant’s brow lowered.

‘For what purpose?’ he asked, haughtily.

‘That she did not say; but I imagined Cicely was not well.’

‘Nor is she,’ answered Durant, relieved by his reply. ‘All this nursing has been too much for her; she is quite knocked up. She ought to have gone to bed instead of coming out walking; only Fleming insisted, and like a fool I have brought her too far.’

‘She had better come to the Vicarage; it is much nearer than the House. She can have her old room to rest in till a carriage is sent for her.’

‘Yes, take me to the Vicarage—let me

go there altogether—back to peace and happiness !’

‘She is so hysterical and excited I am afraid of a nervous fever,’ said Durant. ‘Yes, let us take her to the Vicarage. Anything is better than my aunt’s inquisitive questioning.’

The Vicar looked from the one to the other shrewdly. That something important had occurred he fully suspected ; mere fatigue would scarcely be a sufficient cause thus thoroughly to overbalance the equilibrium of both. The real truth did not dawn on him ; he rather ascribed the present position of affairs to a painful interview with Mrs. Fitzalan, for he knew enough of each individual history to be aware that there were many dangerous rocks against which these three might dash if they attempted to sail together, and he fancied Cicely had discovered their

existence for the first time. To come to the rescue, whatever had happened, was the Vicar's sincere desire ; so he asked no questions—only repeated his invitation to the Vicarage, and gave his arm to Cicely to lead her through the wood ; while Durant, with a very downcast, pained look on his usually cheery face, followed at a little distance.

‘The doctor came in while I was at the house,’ remarked the Vicar after awhile ; ‘he gave it as his opinion that in a few days Sir Hubert may be removed to his own house.’

Strange, he thought, that this intelligence called forth no immediate answer. Cicely could not express joy—the going home could afford no happiness to her—nothing, in her then mood she imagined, would ever awaken her interest again.

At the door of the Vicarage Cicely dropped the Vicar's arm and went up to



Durant, while the Vicar passed on in search of nurse Frisby, who he felt sure would surround Lady Fleming with comforts she had judged far too luxurious for Cicely the village-girl.

‘Be kind to Sir Hubert and tell him gently,’ she said.

‘Tell him what? My child, are you mad? There is nothing to tell.’

‘Yes, tell him I have gone away, and would rather live alone in the future.’

‘My God! this cannot be—for mercy’s sake listen to reason.’

She shook her head.

‘I cannot go on acting a lie,’ she said, in a low tone.

‘You *must* be careful. Think what the consequences will be to us both, what dire evil you are doing Fleming in his present suffering state.’

‘It can hurt nobody but me,’ she answered.

‘Do his happiness and mine, then, count for nothing in the scale?’ he asks, driven almost to his wits’ end to find an argument by which Cicely may be induced to let events take their course, and not make a victim of herself by what he in his mannishness considers to be morbidly nursing a sense of guilt which has no reality.

‘Should you be happier if I stayed with Sir Hubert?’

‘How can you ask the question? How could I be happy if I knew you were living miserably by yourself, expiating in a sort of penitential life the existence of a mere sentiment?’

‘Ah!’ she exclaimed, with a twinge as of pain. Was her life-sorrow a matter of mere sentiment to him? Durant saw

the effect his words had had, but he did not attempt to withdraw them—he would have said anything, however hard and cruel, if by so doing he could save her from herself.

‘Arrange it as you will,’ she said, after a pause. ‘My good name will, I see, be safe in your hands; only I cannot bear quite to say good-bye now. We shall meet again, shall we not?’

‘Lives cast together as ours have been by fate are not sundered easily,’ he replied, in a solemn tone. ‘But we must be brave and exercise our free will. See, here come the Vicar and Nurse Frisby.’ ‘This little lady has come back to your care, you see, Frisby. Take her in to rest awhile. Her husband’s illness has quite knocked her up.’

And with a pressure of the hand Durant passed Cicely over to the woman’s good offices—she the while almost doubting whether he

could love her—he seemed so suddenly to have become cold, almost stern.

‘I will send a carriage for Lady Fleming as soon as I get back,’ he had continued, addressing the Vicar. ‘In the meantime I know she is in good hands.’

He was striding off, when the Vicar stopped him.

‘One moment, Durant. I have much to say to you—that woman has been here.’


‘Not now, for heaven’s sake not now. I will come to-morrow, but I must get back to Fleming.’

And before Mr. Burke could make any farther effort to keep him he was gone, leaving his old friend wondering whether all the denizens of the great world gave way to excitement in the same way that these people who had lately come from London seemed to do.


CHAPTER V.

SEVERING THE LINK.

Two days have elapsed since Cicely accepted a temporary refuge under the Vicar's hospitable roof, for on a carriage being sent for her from the House she had declined to go back, on the plea of illness, and had remained since then an occupant of the little room she had dwelt in in old days. Her maid had come to wait on her and bring her what was necessary for her toilet, but she had remained passively in bed, in a state which seemed one of mental stupor, speaking to no one, heeding nothing that passed. To Sir Hubert's loving messages she gave no answer; to



Mr. Durant's written entreaties that she would return to the Hall she was equally unresponding. She lay there like one dead to every sense. Hope and happiness had expired within her, and with them every other sensation seemed wholly extinct. She complained of no malady, no pain, for she never spoke—only lay there through the long hours of the busy day and the silent night, perfectly pulseless, inert, and prostrate, seemingly only conscious of the rest she was experiencing, but in reality dwelling on the misery which like a huge black cloud had crushed her with its gloom. Those who watched her could arrive at no conclusion as they tried to give a name to her disease, a reason for this sudden stagnation of the vital functions. Her case baffled the physicians who were sent from her husband's bedside to look at her ; it baffled the attendants who



watched her hour by hour, yet saw no amelioration, no change.

‘Sir Hubert has got leave from the doctors to come and see her ladyship to-morrow,’ the maid from the Hall had whispered to Nurse Frisby. ‘It is scarcely fitting he should be out yet awhile, but they think the sudden sight of him may bring her to a bit, poor thing.’

Notwithstanding her seeming coma and the low tone in which the words were spoken they had reached Cicely’s sensitive ears, and a pink flush spread itself over her cheeks as she listened.

‘Sir Hubert—coming here—why would they not let her be at peace—why was she ever to be hunted away from rest and quietude? He would ask her to go with him, and all that dreadful life of misery and lying would recommence.’

Twilight was gathering as she had heard the maid's words, and as night drew its mantle slowly round her she still lay and pondered. At last, after a long while she seemed to notice that there were people about her—told Nurse Frisby that she was better, and would like some tea and to get up for a little while. As one recovering from a long trance she slowly struggled back to life.

‘Sir Hubert was coming—then rest was over!’ was the keynote of her thoughts, the one idea which seemed to impel her into action.

‘There is a dear pretty bird,’ the nurse had said, in a tone very different to the acrid one in which she used to address her. ‘The Vicar will be quite glad to see you better. He has been that lonesome like since you have lain there; and as for Master Harry, he

has been in a power of trouble—one would think his own kith and kin lay a-dying.'

'Is Mr. Durant still at the Hall?' asked Cicely, looking under her pillow for her handkerchief as she spoke.

'Ay is he, nursing Sir Hubert like his own brother—so folks say. Master Harry was always a kind-hearted lad, though a bit mischievous at times.'

No wonder Cicely had cased herself in the impenetrable reserve of apparent stupor, if she did not wish to be persecuted by garrulity such as this. Now, however, she answered, 'Get me some tea quickly, good Mrs. Frisby, and send Judkins with a dressing-gown. That wood-fire looks cheery; I should like to sit by it.'

'Verily this was sudden resurrection and no mistake,' old Frisby announced to the Vicar as she went to do Cicely's bidding;

but though the good man smiled at the welcome tidings, he failed to ascribe a reason for the change, nor, in fact, sought for one beyond the capricious vagaries of illness. Half an hour later, when Cicely, in her pretty gown, was seated by the fire, the Vicar came to pay her a little visit, and was more hopeful and happy about 'the child' than he had been since she came to Swinton. She appeared tranquil and calm, as if the feverish excitement she had contracted of late had passed away and left a healthier spirit in its place. Nurse Frisby puts her head in while they are still enjoying their *tête-à-tête*.

'Master Harry is downstairs inquiring after her ladyship,' she announces.

'Shall he come up?' asks the Vicar, turning to Cicely. 'He will be better able to report favourably of you to Sir Hubert.'

'No,' she says. 'I am not strong enough

to see more visitors to-day. Tell Mr. Durant I thank him, but I cannot see him.' And either the firelight or the hot blood makes the pallid waxen features all aglow with a crimson hue.

The Vicar goes down to speak to Durant, and Nurse Frisby is despatched with a request from Lady Fleming to leave her for a little while, as she is very tired. Once alone, Cicely's head falls languidly against the side of the chair, and hot tears course each other rapidly down her cheeks.

'It must be. I alone must sever this fearful link—I alone must free myself from the charm some evil fairy has cast over me.'

And then she gets up and wanders about the room in a restless sort of way, arranging things as she does so—not as if a spirit of tidiness had moved her, but as if her

thoughts were rambling far away and her fingers were acting without guidance. Strange that several articles of dress should find their way into a small handbag Judkins had brought from the Hall and had thrown in the corner when she had emptied it, and that when filled it should be thrust under the bed, while Cicely pursues her desultory walk and makes farther minute arrangements in the distribution of her effects. At last, exhausted, she sinks once more into the arm-chair, and is to all appearance half-asleep, when Nurse Frisby brings in 'a tempting morsel for her ladyship's supper.' Cicely rouses herself with an effort, and eats as though she relishes the good woman's dainties.

'I have not had so much appetite for days,' she says, with a smile. 'No, no more, thank you, Mrs. Frisby; but you may put

something by my bedside, in case I am hungry in the night; and neither you nor Judkins need sit up. I will ring if I want anything. Judkins has gone up to the Hall? Ah, so much the better. She was not of much use here—not so good a nurse as you are. But go to bed, there is a good soul. I am ever so much better to-night.’

Mrs. Frisby would not allow herself to be dismissed till she saw her ladyship comfortably tucked up, and everything that she could possibly want put close at hand. Then she left her, and shortly afterwards the Vicarage became stilled and quiet; for its inmates, who had been anxious and wakeful when Cicely was ill, now slept the heavy sleep which undisturbed thoughts can alone produce. And Lady Fleming herself? She lay there passively, with wide-open eyes—waiting—watching for the dawn.

‘ Would it never come? ’

Ah, how many a sick and ailing one has asked that question before ! And when it does at last arrive what does it not infrequently bring?—a troublous day, more to be dreaded in its events than were the monotonous hours of the lazily creeping night.

It came at last, with its grey tints deepening gradually into light through the casement window, the blind of which Cicely had requested Nurse Frisby to draw up, and she lay and looked at it till at last every object in the room became discernible ; then she rose, dressed herself slowly—for her trembling fingers had but little power—put on the hat she had worn during that last walk with Durant, drew the handbag from its hiding-place beneath the bed, and seemed quite ready for a start. Yet it was on no unholy mission she was bent, for before she left the

room which had proved such a peaceful retreat for her, she knelt and breathed a silent prayer.

A few minutes more and she had gone down the oaken staircase, from whence when she paused she could hear the heavy breathing of the slumbering inmates ; then she carefully unbolted the outer door and stood inhaling the fresh, keen air of the early morn. The oxygen seems to have renewed her force, for she trips briskly along, and is quickly out of sight of the Vicarage and the village. She does not meet a creature, but pursues her way to the railway station, where a young porter, totally unknown to her, is the only being on guard.

‘ When does the next train go to London, if you please ? ’ she asks, timidly.

‘ Next up ? Seven-fifteen. ’

She looks at her watch. Twenty minutes

to wait. She goes on to the platform and takes out the few sandwiches Nurse Frisby had put by her bedside and eats them, more because she feels her strength must be coaxed than because she is really hungry. What, however, would she not have given for a cup of warm coffee! She sends the strange porter for her ticket—fearing recognition from the other officials—and in less than three-quarters of an hour from the time she left the Vicarage is rattling up to London at the rate of forty miles an hour.

‘Lady Fleming is gone—whither?’ Is the question the Vicar and Nurse Frisby ask each other, when an hour later her absence is first discovered.

‘To the Hall, of course—she has made immediate use of her returned strength to go at once and see Sir Hubert. It was a foolish, rash proceeding, but young things

are impetuous, and Cicely is no exception.'

Thus they settled the matter, and made no inquiries till some time later, when Judkins arrived with the intelligence that her ladyship had certainly not come up there. Then the Vicar's brow grew dark, for he feared evil, though in what form he scarcely knew ; yet, though he of late years had had but little intercourse with the world, he was a prudent man and kept his thoughts to himself. He bade the two women remain indoors and make no clamour about Cicely's disappearance, while he himself went up to the Hall in search of Harry Durant.

Yes, he had misjudged him ; there at his 'post of observation,' watching the gradual recovery of his friend, he found Mr. Durant. But where was Cicely?

Durant's look of startled horror as he asked this question of him once more shook the Vicar's confidence, but it was speedily restored; for Durant, at once seeing the imminent peril of the situation, resolved to make light of it, and said, with a forced laugh—

‘A whimsical little woman is Lady Fleming. I dare say she has gone to get the London house ready for Sir Hubert—she talked of doing so the other day.’

‘Whimsical with a vengeance,’ retorted the Vicar, who had but little patience with such vagaries. ‘It would have been better if she had stayed here to nurse him, as a wife should.’

‘She hates Mrs. Bertrand, who is always reminding her of what she was once,’ said Durant in excuse. ‘I agree with you, it is awkward when a self-willed woman will

not allow herself to be controlled by reason. But we must make the best of it. Perhaps it will be wiser not to let Fleming know she has gone—at any rate not at present—he is so very excitable.’

‘Well, you seem to understand all about it, my dear boy ; so I suppose it is all right. We country folk don’t do such wild things. At all events you think there is no cause for anxiety?’

‘None in the least—why should there be?’

‘That you know best, Durant. I have my suspicions whether Cicely altogether cares for Sir Hubert.’

‘A mere fancy on your part, I assure you, my dear Burke—their matrimonial relations are of the happiest.’

‘Humph! They have an odd way of showing it. Don’t you think one of us had

better go up to town and bring this young woman back to what I, with my old-fashioned ideas, should call her duty? You are a younger, more active man than I am: suppose you were to go?’

‘I! Not for the whole world would I stir from this place on such an errand; and as for you, Burke, you have not been in London for so long, it would only bother you. Go and write her a homily; it will answer every purpose.’

‘You take the affair uncommonly coolly, I must say,’ said the Vicar, who was more perplexed by Durant’s view of the case than he had even been by the fact of Cicely’s sudden flight.

‘We live, my dear fellow, we children of the nineteenth century, and life goes so fast, we have no time to speculate over the whys and wherefores of a woman’s whims. Still

for all that I think a sermon from you will not harm this little lady. In the meantime—excuse me, and don't think me rude—Fleming is waiting for me to write letters for him, and invalids are impatient.'

Thus dismissed, what could the Vicar do but return forthwith to the Vicarage, but little satisfied at heart by the cavalier way Durant treated what to him seemed a most extraordinary and unjustifiable proceeding? Could he have seen his old pupil pacing rapidly through the shrubbery walks some ten minutes later, he might have learnt from his face how much of acting and how little truth there had been in that last interview between them. That Cicely had gone to Campden Hill, Harry Durant did not for a moment believe.

'Where had she gone, and what rash step was she about to take?' were the questions

which at that moment he would have given his life to solve. Yet he dared not stir—his absence from Swinton would, he felt, involve her reputation irreparably. The only chance of happiness in the future lay in the fact of their being apart at this moment being proved unmistakeably. ‘Thank God he was at Swinton with the Bertrands; thus his dear aunt’s slanderous tongue could not vilify Cicely’s name on his account. Yet something must be done. Where could she be? She must be found at once. Algy Duncombe!’ He had had a letter from him that very morning, telling him all the particulars of his interview with Miss Wilson. Durant had been brooding irritably over its contents when the Vicar was announced—now he would utilise the subject. For a second he went back to the house.

‘Beg Sir Hubert not to leave his room till I return,’ he said to the valet, and then strode off once again through the shrubbery walks past the lodge, taking the short cut through the wood to the telegraph office.

‘Come down by the 12.20 and talk the matter over—most important,’ was the message which the electric wires bore to Algy Duncombe, just as he was finishing his eleven o’clock breakfast.

CHAPTER VI.

UNTER VIER AUGEN.

‘I CAME off at such a tremendous rate that I left my baccy behind. Can you provide that “fusiform spiral-wound bundle of chopped stems and miscellaneous incombustibles, the cigar?”’ And Algy Duncombe jumped on to the platform at the Swinton station and hit Durant, who was standing moodily at a little distance, familiarly on the back. The expression of his friend’s face, however, checked him, and he changed his tone. ‘By Jove, there is something up—what is it, old fellow?’

‘More than I should care to acknowledge

to any man save yourself; but I believe you are to be trusted, Algy.' And he wrung the boy's extended hand with an amount of warmth that was almost painful.

'To the death—when you are concerned,' was the ready answer. 'I regret though that the intelligence I thought it right to send you has such grave importance.'

'That has but little to do with the present matter. Let us get away from here and stroll down the lane, where we can talk freely.'

Algy, completely sobered out of his usual facetiousness by Durant's grave manner, followed without speaking; and having lighted the cigar Durant had given him, the two men walked on for a few paces in silence.

When quite out of hearing of the idlers about the railway station Durant said in a

low tone, which he strove to render deep and calm—

‘Cicely has gone away ; she left for London by the 7.15 train this morning.’

‘Well ?’ asked the other, who as yet saw nothing special in the announcement, save that he himself should not have cared to start before the world was aired, ‘Well ?’

‘I count on you to go after her—find her, and bring her to reason. Fleming as yet knows nothing of what has happened.’

‘Good heavens, Durant, can I believe my ears?’ cried Algy, to whom Deb’s insinuations came with a sudden rush. ‘Then there is some truth in the reports I have heard.’

‘Not a word—believe nothing, listen to nothing. Be silent and act, if you have any regard for Cicely—for me.’

‘But I cannot act. Unless I know what has happened I shall only make a jumble of

the whole affair. Why has Lady Fleming gone away ? ’

‘ From a false idea that she has betrayed her husband’s honour,’ answered Durant, with a groan.

‘ *False!* You are quite sure, then, that it is false ? ’

Durant stopped and glared at him wildly.

‘ By G— man, you do not think it could be true—you have not such a base opinion of her purity and my integrity as to imagine this thing could be possible ? ’

‘ Forgive me, Durant—forgive me ; but I don’t clearly understand. Your moral standard and mine may not be quite the same, you see. I am a loose fish and a naughty boy, so the world says, yet I should not mind learning how far a man may go with his friend’s wife without infringing on the laws honour prescribes.’

‘If you have only come here to jeer and turn the whole matter into ridicule the sooner you return to town the better, and I will find some one else to help me out of this mess,’ said Durant, angrily.

‘You totally misunderstand me—I attach far too much importance to the case to dream of ridicule,’ replied Algy, with an amount of dignity for which few of his companions would have given him credit. ‘A few months since Lady Fleming and I established a bond of brotherly and sisterly regard which was to last for life. As her brother, I ask of you now for an account of your late conduct, and how much you have been to blame in this matter.’

‘Algy, spare me. I did not say I was not to blame’ cried Durant, who in his excitement grew abject and angry by turns; ‘I only said that no real harm had been done.

Mad, insensate words may have been spoken, but pray God that they may be forgotten. Margaret—Mrs. Fitzalan—is the she-devil who has planned and brought about this misery ; she it was who came down here a few days since, met us walking by the mill-dam, and opened Cicely's eyes to a sense of her own peril.'

Algy puffed his cigar vigorously for a few seconds.

'Curse that woman !' he said at last. 'I always thought she was a devil incarnate. So on the strength of that Lady Fleming has run away ?'

'She could not bear to meet Fleming again ; she said she would rather go to the ends of the earth alone than feel his eyes were on her.'

'Foolish ! What d—— foolish things some people will do ! Here is a hornets'

nest she has dragged down on herself! and, you say, all for nothing.'

'I swear to you, as I am a living man, that I would rather die here at your feet than that one hair of Cicely's innocent head should be injured.'

'Oh, that is all very fine; but if you had not cared quite so much about her innocent head perhaps a good deal of this botheration might have been saved.'

'True. Yet it was hard to see the girl you loved taken from before your very eyes and married off to another man at Mrs. Fitzalan's bidding.'

'Knowing that you loved her before she married Fleming, I am all with you,' said Algy. 'If I thought you had been sneaking into the home circle since, I should be far more severe. Fleming being the interloper makes all the difference in the case. You

know I started by saying my code of morals was not high.'

'So it seems. For my part I blame myself more. Knowing, as I did, my own feelings, and suspecting Cicely's, I ought never to have visited at Fleming's house. But this discussion avails but little now. The question is, what is to be done? for I look to you, Algy, and you only, to help both her and me through this dilemma.'

'That is jolly hearing; for if I make a mistake I suppose I shall have to bear the brunt of the whole business. Never mind, I am pretty callous. Go on; give me every particular.'

In a few succinct words Durant gave the details, Algy calmly smoking the while and digesting all he heard.

'I see,' he said at last. 'Of course you must stop here, old fellow, and throw as

much dust as possible in Fleming's eyes. It is a mercy he is tied by the leg. Keep him as ill as you can till you hear from me. I wonder where the deuce that little girl can have gone? Lady Susan would have been the right form, but she is up in Scotland. I dare say I shall find her sitting calmly, waiting the issue of events, in her own drawing-room at Campden Hill. I'll telegraph if she is there.'

'For heaven's sake mind what you telegraph in this country place.'

'My dear fellow, trust me for ambiguity. Half an hour till the next train starts. Don't get in a fever, my dear Durant. It will be all right; only, for a sensible man like you, I must say you have made a horrid mull. So Mrs. Fitz is a lodge-keeper's daughter after all! You'll commend me for discernment, won't you? I can't think


what the deuce you took up with such a woman for.'

'She was my first love in days gone by, when we were boy and girl together. Old Peter gave her a first-rate education, and intended her for a governess.'

'And you, I suppose, philandered with her and then jilted her for higher game; hence this present imbroglio?' said Algy, laughing.

'On the contrary. She went as governess to Burke's children—they were all living then. There she met Fitzalan—he was a Yankee connection of Burke's wife. From what was passing between them I imagined my attentions were not appreciated, and I withdrew them.'

'Having grown somewhat tired of the young woman,' suggested Algy, parenthetically.




‘Somebody—my aunt, I believe,’ went on Durant, without heeding the interruption —‘gave Burke a hint that his governess’ principles were not altogether of the strictest, and he dismissed her. She wrote me a letter, blaming me for what she chose to call her loss of “place and name.” I did not answer it, and soon after I heard she had gone to America—I supposed with Fitzalan.’

‘Your little episodes with women don’t seem to have been very successful, my dear fellow. When did this bright specimen of the frail sex come back from America?’

‘That I scarcely know. I next heard of her flaunting her ill-gotten wealth in Paris, under the name of Mrs. Fitzalan.’

‘And you did not attempt to prevent society from being humbugged into a belief in her virtues?’



‘There are wheels within wheels, my dear Algy. Some years ago, when Peter and I were smoking our pipes on the bridge above the old mill-dam, we heard a young child’s cry, and on going to see whence it came we found a little creature of about three years old, warmly wrapped up, lying in a sort of package—half cradle, half basket. We looked at each other in some perplexity, for what to do we knew not. Where it could have come from or why it had been put there were questions we could not solve. “I’ll take it home to my fireside,” said the old man at last. “Since Madge left me it has been a lonesome one.” And he took the child up in his arms. It clung to him and began to laugh. The same idea seized us both : had Margaret brought this child and left it almost at her father’s door? We neither of us ever discovered the truth ; but

from that hour Cicely learnt to call the old man Grand-dad.'

'And is Lady Fleming Mrs. Fitzalan's daughter?' asked Algy, aghast at Durant's tale.

'No, a thousand times no!' thundered the other, angrily. 'Do you think so much gentleness and purity could exist in Margaret Denham's child?'

'Well, not exactly, perhaps. But why the deuce, then, did Mrs. Fitz have anything to do with launching the young woman into the great world?'

'It was a mistake, my boy. I who made it have never ceased to regret it. When I saw Cicely on my return from Italy I felt perfectly certain from the likeness that she was Fitzalan's daughter. I was also perfectly certain that the so-called Mrs. Fitzalan was spending in Paris the money that

by some means she had obtained from him. Peter died at that identical time. I went off to Paris to see what could be arranged for the girl. Margaret swore by every saint in and out of the calendar that the child was not hers, but consented to adopt her, on condition that I made no allusions to her past life, nor allowed the Parisian world to believe that her birth had been a low one. How in the name of wonder she escaped recognition from my sharp-sighted aunt has been a marvel to me to this hour.'

'Well, it is the queerest story I have heard for some time, and one in which I should have thought a shrewd man like you would scarcely have intermeddled.'

'Oh, it would all have worked well enough if Margaret had not allowed her jealous passions to overrule her common sense.'

‘Or if you had not lost your head by falling in love with Cicely, eh? By Jove, Durant, but you must have a devilish queer opinion of women if you think an old love is likely to help you to win a new one.’

‘My love for her had died out—I imagined her old passion for me had done so too. I was mistaken—that is all—and I have had to pay for it no one knows how dearly.’

There was a short pause; and then Algy, whose curiosity almost overbalanced his friendly regard, asked—

‘Have you then never discovered who Lady Fleming’s parents are?’

‘From Miss Wilson, yes, but only lately. She gave me some proofs which involved Margaret in so felonious a scheme that I almost regretted I had ever learnt its nature. In a weak moment, to save Cicely’s reputa-

tion from her caustic tongue, I allowed her to burn them. But a truce to the discussion of her infamies; I am in no mood for dwelling on them—the point at issue is too grave.’

‘My dear fellow, it will be all right as long as you stay on here. Only look chirpy—if you seem all wrong people are sure to suspect there is something up. There is the bell—I am off to town. By the way, how is May? Give her my love.’

‘I will, I will. I only wish my aunt was amenable to reason on that subject, Algy. I have learnt only too bitterly of late the misery that arises from interference.’

They shook hands warmly as Algy jumped into the train, each determined to do the best he could for the other according as circumstances should arise.

It was already long past the usual luncheon hour at the Hall, but Durant was too heavy at heart to hasten his movements. The idea of meeting all the chattering, laughing party assembled round his uncle's table bored him ; and though he felt it would be wiser to go and be as one of them, yet the inclination to dawdle along the road and allow his thoughts to have their uncontrolled range was too strong to be resisted. Half-way through the little wood he met dumb Molly. He had not seen her since Peter's death, and the sudden apparition now came to him as an evil omen. Strong man though he was, it was strange how recent events and a sort of inner consciousness of wrong made him at times almost womanish in his fears and doubts. To communicate with Molly was no easy matter, but Durant had known her since

he was a boy, and so more or less understood her signs and almost unintelligible sounds. On the present occasion it was obvious she wished him to follow her, and she led him through the tortuous windings of the wood to the tree beneath which Peter had been found by Cicely on the night preceding his death. In the trunk of the tree there was a huge cavity extending downwards farther than the arm could conveniently reach. Molly took a long stick which was near, and, putting it into the opening, knocked violently on some hard substance which lay at the bottom. She then gave him the stick, as though bidding him do the same. It was clear from the sound that there was something there beyond the mere crumbings of nature, but how to arrive at discovering what it was was not so easy? He tore a piece of paper from his

note-book and began a short cross-examination of old Molly.

‘When did you discover this?’ he wrote.

‘Monday,’ she answered, writing slowly in a large text hand.

‘How?’ he next asked.

‘*She* came,’ was the answer.

‘Did she find anything?’

‘No.’

‘You succeeded when she failed?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know what it is?’

‘Peter’s hoard.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I have seen him here.’

‘At this exact spot?’

‘In the wood—I did not know where till Monday.’

‘He was found dying here?’

‘Yes, I found him.’

‘You struck him, I suppose, to get his gold?’

‘No, no, no.’ And old Molly grew so violently excited that the writing was almost illegible.

He asked no farther questions for the moment, but proceeded to reach if possible whatever it was that was deposited in the trunk of the old tree.

After much difficulty, by means of a crooked stick, he succeeded in partially raising what appeared to be a small tin box—then, after various unsuccessful attempts, he brought it up sufficiently near the surface to touch it with his hand.

It was an old-fashioned cash-box, partly wrapped in brown paper, which decay and damp had more than half-destroyed, but on which the word ‘Margaret’ had not been

wholly erased. The box was locked ; and as Mr. Durant felt by no means justified in wrenching it open, neither his curiosity nor Molly's as to its contents was likely to be satisfied.

‘Had she murdered the old man, knowing of this hoard?’ he wondered to himself. ‘But if so why had she not possessed herself of it before?’

It was a fresh tangle of circumstances, and one during the unwinding of which he would most gladly have refused to hold the skein ; but to attempt avoidance in meddling with these matters—*cui bono*? They pursued him with unceasing pertinacity. The Vicar should have his share of this new annoyance, however, and to the Vicarage he forthwith conducted dumb Molly and carried the tin box.

Mr. Burke, from long usage and a know-

ledge of the dumb alphabet, communicated readily with Molly, and soon elicited the real facts of the case, of which Mr. Durant had only succeeded in obtaining a vague outline. Molly had watched Mrs. Fitzalan wandering about, in search evidently of something in the little wood. She had remembered how Peter had not unfrequently groped here of old, and had at last fallen at the foot of the old tree. This had set her wondering and investigating till she had found the secret hiding-place, in the discovery of which the daughter had failed.

‘Was it to look for that box Margaret came to Swinton?’ asked Mr. Durant.

‘Probably. She said the papers I delivered to her—by request, a year after her father’s death—failed to provide a correct account and were worthless, but she did not say for what she was searching. Only that

she believed the whole thing to be a myth—an hallucination of the old man's brain. He was so strange and doting of late that I was inclined to agree with her.'

'Peter up to his last hour was as clear as you or I,' answered Durant. 'Do you think that woman,' pointing to Molly, 'had aught to do with his death?'

'No—a thousand times no. I think he died from natural causes, like many a miser gloating over his hoards. Strange he should have left them to Margaret! She has the key of that box.'

'Yet his last words were of Cicely,' murmured Mr. Durant.

'Ay, my dear Harry, but blood is thicker than water—Margaret was his child.'

'Thank God, Lady Fleming is of another race,' said Durant, fervently. 'But I must be off. Into your hands I commit

the box. You had better write to that arch-fiend Margaret—I wish to have no intercourse with her. Here, Molly.’ And he tossed the old woman a sovereign, smiling, notwithstanding his preoccupation of mind, at the bright light that shone in the dim old eyes which had not gazed on gold this many a day.

CHAPTER VII.

THE TWO WOMEN.

THE clock was on the stroke of eight as Cicely got out of the train at the Charing Cross station. She stood for a moment, bag in hand, and looked round almost hopelessly. Where was she going? Had she formed any definite plans when she so rashly made up her mind to see if it were possible to run away from misery? Wretched girl, was she not rather plunging more deeply into a maze of difficulties from which even her best friends would find it nearly impossible to extricate her? But she had asked no advice, taken no kindly counsel, and for the

first time in her life she found herself alone in the whirl of London, with the forlorn sensation that no one knew where to find her, even if they cared to do so. Oppressed by this thought and by the general sense of dreariness which hung over her, she stood irresolute.

‘Four-wheeler, mum—do you want a four-wheeler?’ asked a civil porter. But Cicely had by no means made up her mind, and having arrived in town, had almost determined to get into the next train and go back again into the country.

A hand is laid on her shoulder.

‘Cicely! and alone? Has *he* forsaken you, as he forsook me in the old days?’

Cicely shook from head to foot. The last person she had expected or wished to meet was Mrs. Fitzalan.

‘Nay, child, don’t be foolish. You may

have worse friends than I am. I have no spite against you—only against *him*. Where is he?’

With an effort Cicely sought to regain composure and collect her ideas, for both seemed to have deserted her on the instant at the sight of this woman, whom she had learnt so thoroughly to dread—whose words had been ringing in her ears ever since the meeting by the mill-dam.

‘Who do you mean? What do you mean?’ she asked, falteringly.

‘Oh, you know perfectly what I mean. But come into the hotel close by. You look faint and exhausted. I will order breakfast.’

‘Breakfast with you, Mrs. Fitzalan?’

‘Why not, silly one? It will not be the first time. I had intended starting for Paris by a train which goes in a few minutes; but

a conversation with you will be more profitable for us both, so I will defer my departure till the evening. It is only another of those little turns at the caprice of fate to which we both seem liable, my love. Have you any servants waiting here? If so, tell them you are going to breakfast with me.'

'I am quite alone,' murmured Cicely, thoroughly ashamed of the position in which she had placed herself.


'Indeed! Strange travelling for Sir Hubert Fleming's wife,' Mrs. Fitzalan said as she led the way into the hotel. 'I imagined he would have taken more care of you.'

'He knows nothing of the matter—is in bed ill.'

Mrs. Fitzalan looked at her fixedly for a moment.

‘Cicely, is it possible that you have come here to meet Durant? Take my advice : go back, child, before it is too late. I am what most of your friends would call a vile intriguing adventuress. It may be so ; but, believe me, I have lived too much in the world not to have learnt that it is dangerous to break the prescribed laws of conventionality.’

‘Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, how can you talk to me like this?’ said Cicely, growing hysterical from weakness and emotion. ‘I only want to be good and faithful. I ran away because I was afraid to stay down there—afraid Sir Hubert would discover how wicked I have been ; and now you twit me for trying to do what is right. It is all your fault that I am so miserable. If you had not insisted on my marrying Sir Hubert things would have come straight at last.’



‘I have no doubt they would,’ answered the other, mockingly. ‘I should have had the supreme felicity of seeing you the wife of my old lover. But wait till we get some breakfast, and we will discuss the matter more freely.’

And so in a private room at the Charing Cross Hotel these two sat together; and Cicely let Mrs Fitzalan make what arrangements she listed, looking very dreamy and thoughtful the while.

‘Mr. Durant your lover!’ she said at last, when they were once more alone. ‘Mrs. Fitzalan, I never knew anything of this.’

‘I dare say not—how should you? Before you were even born he had professed an attachment for me, and received in return a love as faithful and devoted as was ever lavished on man.’

‘Good gracious, how dreadful! And I have been made to suffer for this!’

‘Yes, poor child, you have suffered through loving him. Perhaps, too, it was part of a heritage of hate transferred to you from your dead father—for he it was who stood between Harry Durant and me.’

‘My father!’

‘Yes, Stephen Fitzalan. He came to Swinton as a guest while I was governess at Mr. Burke’s, admired me, and talked nonsense, which irritated Mr. Durant till he grew jealous and would hear no reason. I was persecuted by his family—I believed then at his instance—turned out of my situation, reviled, contemned as good for nothing. When I appealed to him he treated me with scorn—left my letters unanswered. I have learnt since that Mrs. Bertrand, who dreaded his making a low

marriage, which she called an alliance with me, had the most vilifying reports circulated about me. To think that he believed them is gall and wormwood to me now—it maddened me then till it turned my heart to stone, and rendered me callous to every principle of right and wrong. I swore I would never be the dupe of another man, nor again allow my blighted feelings to ripen into affection; and both in letter and in spirit I have kept my word.’

‘Poor Mrs. Fitzalan—I am so sorry—I wish I could have helped you.’

‘Tush, girl, I want no pity—let me go on. Under the influence of the despair from which I could not free myself I forsook my poor old father, left England without bidding good-bye to anyone, and went to America, accompanied only by Mary Wilson, who had once been a servant of the

Burkes, and was a Swinton woman. After striving with fortune for six months, chance led me one day into the same street as Stephen Fitzalan. We stopped and spoke. I hated him with a deep and bitter hatred for the wrong he had unwittingly caused me; but hunger is sometimes stronger than hate. He had, it seemed, a wife in America, though he had never vouchsafed to inform us of the fact during his temporary residence in England, or what mischief might he not have averted!—a wife and child. That child, Cicely, was yourself.’

‘I? Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, why did you not tell me this before?’

‘Because it did not suit my plans, little one. But the fight is nearly over now. You may as well know the truth. I have had my revenge on Harry Durant, and for the rest it matters but little.’

‘And my mother—my father—are they still alive?’

‘They were both drowned by the upsetting of a boat at New London.’

‘Ah!’ sighed Cicely, on whose aching heart a ray of joy seemed to have descended as she for a moment hoped there were yet those left on earth who would love her as one’s own kith and kin only can love. ‘And grand-dad,’ she said, after a moment’s pause, ‘was he not my grand-dad after all? Yet I did love him so!’


‘For his sake, child, I would save you from yourself now. You took mine, the daughter’s place, by him. In return I will keep you in the straight path—if it be possible.’

The good there is latent in every human heart, however evil, was awakened in Margaret Denham as she thought of her dead

father and the hard neglect with which she had treated him,

‘But how did I come there? Why are you Mrs. Fitzalan?’ Cicely asked, totally at a loss to comprehend how these things came about.

Mrs. Fitzalan looked down, twitching her hands nervously as they lay in her lap, and after a moment’s consideration said, in a low tone, ‘That which followed your father and mother’s death is the darkest chapter in the history of my past life—the only episode of which I am ashamed—whatever Mr. Durrant in his wrath may say to the contrary. They were both drowned at New London, as I have told you. You, their child, and I who had been appointed half-governess, half-nurse in charge of you, were saved. It was another of those freaks of fate in which we have shared, Cicely.’



‘Never mind fate—I hate to think it can influence me,’ cried Cicely, shivering.

‘We were carried into a warm, comfortable inn, given dry clothes, and tended. We were all strangers in those parts—had simply gone there for a summer’s outing. The people by whom we were surrounded mistook me for the wife instead of the governess and addressed me as Mrs. Fitzalan. One only of the party who had been saved knew the truth, a certain M. Barbier, whose acquaintance I had made at New York. I offered no word of contradiction, and hours grew into days till, partly at M. Barbier’s instigation, partly to fill the purse which this accident had once more emptied, I resolved to accept the name and title of the dead, M. Barbier promising, on receiving his share of the profits, to make all the necessary arrangements for proving my identity.’

‘ And yet after taking my mother’s name you deserted me,’ said Cicely. ‘ Her friends—why did they never claim me ? ’

‘ She was an orphan, with no near relation—this I knew ; and as I started with you for Europe as soon as I could, leaving M. Barbier to arrange all business details, friends had not much opportunity for making inquiries. Mary Wilson came with us ; I dared not leave her behind—she knew too much of the truth. Like myself, she was poor and amenable to my authority through bribery, but I felt I must have her under my own eye, and I was right—she has thrown off my influence for that of Harry Durant now.’

‘ How so ? What has Mr. Durant to do with the matter ? ’

‘ Listen and do not interrupt. We took a lodging in London together, we three—

you and I and Wilson—and for a time I was half-disposed to keep you with me. Your prattle amused me, and your pretty ways calmed my conscience and made me almost believe that I had done no wrong. But Mr. Durant's image came between us then, as it has done later. A living child whose parentage I dared not acknowledge, would it not be providing a proof that his suspicions in the past had not been without foundation? and on a sudden one day I resolved to part with you, at whatever cost. Mary Wilson promised to arrange for your future and took you to Swinton. That poor old father found you and made a pet of you was one of your good chances, child—it was not of my arranging.'

'It was a happy chance, Mrs. Fitzalan, for I had a glad and joyous childhood; but the sunshine has all gone now.'

‘Nonsense, Cicely, don’t get maudlin ; let me finish my story. When your good star shone my evil one was in the ascendant. Harry Durant was with father when he found you, where Mary Wilson had put you, by the old mill-dam. He ferreted about till he traced her as the depositor of the child ; followed her to London, sought to discover if I were the baby’s mother, and to her positive negative scarcely seemed to give a symptom of credence. She was true to me then, and did not give him particulars as to what had happened. But gradual degeneration produces ruin at the last. Mary Wilson is now in Mr. Durant’s pay, and it is useless for me longer to conceal the truth. The capital I have been spending for years was yours, and I am a pauper at your feet.’

‘Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, you have been kind to me—though you have done me also a

deep and bitter wrong. But I will not be uncharitable and vindictive ; God knows I want charity and loving kindness myself. Keep the money as long as you live, and let there be peace between us.'

'There is none to keep.' And Mrs. Fitzalan laughed a mocking laugh, which startled Cicely by its hollowness. 'Letters received from Paris yesterday inform me that M. Barbier has gone off with all my papers and every available franc that he could realise.'

'How awful!—how dreadful!' said Cicely. 'Is there such a thing as right-mindedness and integrity on earth?'

'Set the example of it, child, by keeping in the straight way yourself. Confidence demands confidence in return. Where were you going when I met you?'

'I don't know. Anywhere, only away,' answered Cicely, sorrowfully.

‘Nonsense. You may be foolish and silly and in love, but I don’t believe you could be so idiotic as to wander out into the world without a purpose and a destination.’

‘It is true though. I didn’t quite know where to go ; I only wanted to avoid seeing Sir Hubert’s melancholy eyes ; and I knew I dared not meet Mr. Durant again after all that had been said, so I ran away.’

‘Thinking, I suppose, that he would be frantic at your disappearance, and would forthwith come and look for you ?’

‘Oh, Mrs. Fitzalan, how wicked you are ! I never thought such a thing.’

‘Well, the world will if you did not ; and what the world will say is the verdict which influences most people’s morality. My advice to you is to go back—of course you

can follow it or not as you please. Send Durant out into the desert—he is more able to languish there than you are. Why should you play Hagar for him? A little banishment will do him good—teach him that other people have feelings as well as he has.’

‘Please—please—don’t talk like that. It makes me so unhappy. I don’t know what to do; but I can’t go back to face everybody and answer all their questions; I have not the strength.’

‘Well, you look rather washed-out and powerless. If you really will not go back I suppose I must stay with you. You certainly are not fit to be left alone.’

‘You, Mrs. Fitzalan, I thought you were on your way to Paris.’

‘One place is the same as another now all the cash is gone. The wreck old Bar-

bier has left behind will no doubt be quite as valuable in a day or two.'

If anything would have made Lady Fleming return to Swinton it would have been the horror she felt at Mrs. Fitzalan's self-imposed presence, but she was too tired and ill to move, much less to make up her mind what was best to be done.

She lay back in her arm-chair and thought. Was it all a dream? The walk by the mill-dam — her flight to town — the strange tale she had just heard — that woman's presence — the fusty, dark private sitting-room at the hotel — could any of it be real? If so, how was it all to end, and why did not death come to release her from the burden of knowledge, freighted with which she would never be able to sail her bark steadily along the waters of life?

'When you have rested we will decide

for the next step,' Mrs. Fitzalan had said, after a very long silence. 'In the meantime this is as good a place as any—only hotels are expensive—as you have run away from Sir Hubert, and the money has run away from us both, we must be careful.'

'I wish you would go to Paris and leave me to take care of myself,' said Cicely, with some irritation.

'Always that little lingering hope that Durant will come to look for you, and I shall be in the way,' retorted her companion, with a sneer.

Cicely started up.

'You have no right to talk to me like this. I never wish to see Mr. Durant again, or I should not be here now.'

'Indeed! Well, never mind; you shall not be teased. Lie down on that sofa and go to sleep. I daresay something will happen

before the day is out to arrange our plans for us.'

Cicely, whose head ached, and whose legs shook so that she was obliged to catch at a chair for support when she had sprung up to make her little speech to Mrs. Fitzalan, sank down on the sofa to which she was led, and for a time, at all events, was totally powerless to exert her free agency.

'If anyone asks for Lady Fleming show them in,' Mrs. Fitzalan whispered to the waiter, who came in for the breakfast things, 'and bring me the morning papers,' she added aloud.

But Cicely heeded neither order—she had fallen from sheer exhaustion into a restless, dreamy sleep, muttering every now and then incoherent words and sentences of which Mrs. Fitzalan fully understood the meaning, and wondered what construction

Sir Hubert would put on them if he heard them. For hours Cicely lay there while Mrs. Fitzalan read her papers, wrote letters, busied herself in various ways, never, however, leaving the room, lest the girl might wake and take her departure.

It is nearly four o'clock when the door opens and the waiter, according to orders, shows in a gentleman.

'Algy Duncombe—always Algy Duncombe,' mutters Mrs. Fitzalan to herself.

Query: would she have kept guard so steadily over Cicely had she not expected another passage-at-arms with Durant?

CHAPTER VIII.

EYE-DUST.

‘ALGY at the station, talking to Cousin Harry! Oh, Rose, you must be mistaken. He would not come to Swinton without seeing me. Besides, I believe he is far too much afraid of mamma to come here at all.’ And May got very pink and white by turns as she stood on the great staircase at the Hall and talked in whispered tones to her sister.

‘It is true though, Mr. Seton told me. They seemed in very earnest conversation, so he did not go up to speak to them, but he distinctly saw Algy get into the train and go off.’

‘Then he is sure not to come here. I wonder what it is all about?’ mused May.

‘About Cicely, I fancy,’ answered Rose, in a very low tone. ‘There is something wrong, I am sure, because everybody looks mysterious, and as if they thought it necessary to walk on tiptoe.’

‘Nonsense, Rose. You have always got a plot in your head. The house has seemed very quiet ever since Sir Hubert was taken ill and all our parties were put off.’

‘Oh, it is not that, for he is better—sitting up in the little boudoir. Mamma has been in there talking to him for more than half an hour.’

‘Perhaps Cicely is very ill?’ suggested May.

‘Perhaps,’ repeated Rose, very slowly, but as though she were better informed and did not believe in her illness.

The two girls leant over the bannisters and looked down into the hall for a minute or two without speaking; then Rose went on—

‘Cousin Harry was always fond of Cicely—you know I told you so in Paris.’

‘Oh, but she is married now,’ answered May.

‘Ye-es,’ said the other, as though she doubted the effect matrimony had on people’s feelings.

‘Rose, I hate you when you get mysterious and full of horrid insinuations. Why can’t you speak plainly?’

‘Because it does not do to speak unless one is quite sure—which I am not.’

‘Sure of what?’

‘Well, May dear, you have eyes—why don’t you use them, as I do? But never mind, come upstairs, and let us try on our new hats.’

‘Bother the new hats! There is no one worth wearing them for in this dismal place.’

‘Heigh-ho for Algy!’ laughed her sister, who, amused by her own flirtation with Mr. Seton, did not enter into May’s feelings.

Before they reached the upper landing they were overtaken by Harry Durant, who had just returned from his interview with Mr. Duncombe and the subsequent finding of the tin box. He sped past them without seemingly noticing that they were there, and going into the little boudoir where Sir Hubert was sitting, closed the door behind him without looking round.

‘There; I told you something was wrong,’ said Rose. ‘Cousin Harry is never bearish unless he is vexed.’

‘As long as nothing has happened to Algy I don’t care,’ murmured May. ‘What

can it be though?' And they went along the corridor wondering.

Mrs. Bertrand had been in the village that morning what she called 'visiting.' That is, she had been giving lectures on ventilation and domestic economy to the cottagers, and receiving from them an equivalent in gossip. Since her return she had been closeted alone for half an hour with Sir Hubert. Given these facts, what need of speculation as to the amount of flame that had been fanned up? The doves alone, perhaps, would judge their mother mildly. The Squire, who had met his nephew at the door and warned him as to what he might expect, had spoken perhaps more sharply of his wife than the good, benevolent man had ever been known to do before.

Sir Hubert was lying on a small sofa by the window when Durant entered the room.

His countenance, always pale, was ghastly even to lividness ; and to Durant's question, 'How are you, Fleming, now you are up and dressed ?' he only answered with a groan, and then muttered the word 'Cicely' between his teeth.

'I believe she went to town this morning, but I know nothing beyond what report says.'

'You know nothing, Durant ? I did not believe you would have deceived me thus. Why did you let me marry her, knowing all the time of the love there was between you ?'

'My dear Fleming, who has told you this ? It is mere gossip of Mrs. Bertrand's fabrication.'

'Can you deny it ?' asked Sir Hubert.
'On your oath, can you deny it ?'

'Most emphatically I can deny that

aught injurious to your honour and her purity has ever passed between Lady Fleming and myself.'

'Yet you have loved her.'

'What I did in the past regards myself alone. She is your wife now, and believe me, Fleming, I am as desirous as you should be that her pure fair name should remain unsullied.'

'You have had a strange way of showing your regard for her name and mine,' retorted the sick man, with a sneer. 'And I, who thought you were to be trusted even with my heart's treasure! Tell me, what have you done with her?'

'Fleming, you do not, cannot believe that I have aught to do with your wife's absence. I know no more about it than you do yourself.'

'The whole village gives you credit for

knowing,' said Sir Hubert. 'I could scarcely have believed that the man I had taken to my heart as my friend could be so treacherous. Cicely false too—she who swore to be faithful to the end.' And he hid his face in his folded hands and wept like a child. Durant looked at him for some minutes in strong emotion; then he touched his shoulder.

'Fleming,' he said, solemnly, 'by the old friendship existing between us I swear to you this story is an exaggeration (he could not, even to save Cicely, say that it was wholly false); I assure you I knew nothing of Lady Fleming's projected absence. Burke told me this morning that she had gone to London, but I attached no especial importance to the information. Women are whimsical and take sudden freaks. Doubtless she will be back before the day is out.'

‘Durant, do you believe what you are saying, or are you only trying to satisfy with mere words a sick and powerless man?’

‘My good fellow, if you were well you would not believe any of this stuff. If I had urged Lady Fleming to flight should I remain quietly here and let her go alone? The whole thing is too preposterous. I tell you I know no more than you do where she is.’

‘Then some accident must have befallen her. Cicely would not go away for nothing, when I am lying here ill too. Only yesterday I was told she could not leave her bed, and to-day she has disappeared altogether.’

‘The person who gave you this later information was a drivelling fool,’ said Durant, savagely. ‘Lady Fleming has some good reason for what she has done, I make no

doubt, and will be very vexed when she learns how disturbed you have been.'

'Durant, you are only talking thus to quiet my anxiety. I can see by the working of your features that you are not so indifferent about her absence as you would have me believe. May I wholly trust you as of yore? Will you go after her and bring her back?'

'No—a thousand times no!' thundered Durant. 'Evil tongues have chosen to couple my name with Lady Fleming's, and you have believed them. I am the last man on earth you should dare ask to do this thing.'

'Forgive me, Durant, forgive me—if I could only go myself, I would ask no one.' And Sir Hubert made an effort to rise, but fell back like a heavy weight on the couch. The excitement of the last hour had been too much for him—a second seizure had

come on. Durant rang the bell violently, muttering a curse on gossip as he did so.

Again the household was convulsed, and messengers were sent in all directions on account of this fresh indisposition of Sir Hubert's. Mrs. Bertrand, who so hated that the gloom of illness should overshadow the festivities over which she had elected to preside, had only herself to blame that the angel of sickness had been recalled.

'It is too tiresome,' she confided to her husband when, a few hours later in the day, the doctor's fiat had gone forth. 'Now Harry tells me he has lost the use of one side. He may be here for weeks. I am sure I wish we had never asked these Flemings at all. All our gaieties given up too!'

'I am glad Fleming was taken ill in comfortable quarters, and I am sure Harry

makes a most assiduous nurse. As for gaieties, if the girls cannot do without them under the circumstances they are not worth consideration.'

'Oh, you always think more of strangers than of your own family—I suppose you call it philanthropy. Where is that minx Cicely all this time, I should like to know? But if men will marry low women they must take the consequences.'

The Squire laughed. It was evident he knew more of the mysterious story than did his wife.

'Oh, you may jeer,' she went on, irritated by his manner, 'but in my opinion the world is turning upside down. To think of that wonderful Mrs. Fitzalan everybody ran after so keenly being Peter's daughter after all!'

'To think of your not recognising her,

that is what amuses me the most,' answered the Squire, bursting into an honest guffaw. 'You, who pride yourself on your perspicacity!'

'And you,' she said, turning on him angrily, 'you knew her quite as well as I did; why did you not find her out?'

'The first time I saw her was at the skating rink in Paris, and I knew her instantly.'

'Mr. Bertrand!' she almost shrieked, 'and you never told me! I could not believe that even you would have behaved so infamously.'

'I calculated the amount of gossip and botheration my information would entail, and resolved to withhold it,' he said, quietly. 'Men, you see, my dear, can hold their tongues when women cannot.'

'I could have been silent as well as you,

if I had been made a confidante and thought worthy of a reason for caution.' And she gave a little toss.

'To wit this morning,' said the Squire. 'What object could there be in poisoning Fleming's mind against Harry, who is as good a boy as ever breathed?'

She drew herself up with dignity.

'Thank goodness women regard virtue from a very different standard to that of a man. I don't see your nephew's goodness, and I considered it my duty to give Sir Hubert a hint that it was time he looked after his wife.'

'When a man has been almost at death's door from paralysis is a very good time to choose for a little unpleasant intelligence—unfounded intelligence, I should say, too—for I do not believe a word of it,' was the pointed remark.

Mrs. Bertrand began to whimper.

‘Oh, if my husband is going to turn against me it is time I gave up trying to do my best in life.’

‘Stuff and nonsense—don’t be silly—give up crying for mercy’s sake; only, if your “best” means interfering with other people’s business, do your worst—that is all I have to say.’

Mrs. Bertrand dried her tears with the corner of her lace handkerchief.

‘You are very severe,’ she said, emphatically, ‘very severe. The only question I would ask by way of retort is, where is Cicely?’


‘What the deuce business is it of yours or mine? All I can say is, not with Harry, since he is here.’

‘No business of ours, Mr. Bertrand? Then we are to invite waifs and strays like

this Lady Fleming into the house, allow them to be as inconsequent and vagrant in their conduct as they choose, and hold ourselves in no way responsible for their actions? A pretty father of a family you make! Let me tell you if this Cicely does return I shall lock the dear girls up safely in a room and allow them to hold no communication with her of any sort whatever.'

'Then all I can say is you will make yourself supremely ridiculous,' was the quiet answer. 'If the girls have not had sufficiently high principles instilled into them to keep straight without being locked up, the key and bolt dodge won't do much good, I fancy.'

'“Evil communications corrupt good manners,” the Bible says,' replied Mrs. Bertrand, conclusively. 'We shall be having the girls walking off next, and thinking it the



right thing to do, if we make too light of the matter.'

'If May had the pluck of a hen-partridge she would have been off with young Duncombe long ago.'

'Mr. Bertrand, are you a father and dare assert such a thing with calmness?'

'Her mother has not shown her much kindly feeling,' he answered. 'I like Algy Duncombe, and should be very well pleased to see May his wife. They are fond of each other, and I don't know why you should try to separate them. It is in the order of nature that people should marry. I doubt if we should have been very amenable to reason if fathers and mothers had interfered with us.'

'We could manage to keep a comfortable home over our heads; but Mr. Duncombe has no money.'


‘Did we think about money when we were young? Besides, I’ll give May a good allowance. It is a mistake for youngsters to begin on too much. Think of your youth, Bertha, and don’t be hard on the girls.’

Thus appealed to, Mrs. Bertrand simpered and tried to get up a touch of sentiment. But was it all love she had felt for the Squire in the old days? Nay, she could not remember the time when the broad acres around Swinton Hall had not filled a prominent place in the picture she had mentally drawn of her future life with him.

Mrs. Bertrand, even in the earliest stage of her development, was of too ungenial a nature to allow feeling to interfere if gold and position lay across its path; or perchance a certain penniless young cornet might have stood a higher chance of winning her affection than the rich land-

owner. Of this, however, the Squire knew nothing, he had accepted her assurances of devotion readily and credited them for far more than they were worth.

It was the first time he had broached the subject of the flirtation between Algy and May to his wife, though on more than one occasion he had talked it over with Harry Durant. In this, too, perhaps, he showed the usual amount of that quiet, unobtrusive wisdom for which his familiars held him renowned. No fresh suitors had declared themselves for May, who studiously avoided receiving any attention when Algy was not by. This somewhat irritated Mrs. Bertrand, and made her almost ready to agree that 'even Algy would be better than no one.' It was against her creed to have both her daughters so long unmarried. Thus she listened more attentively to her husband's



suggestions than she would have done some months ago, and was considering whether it might not perhaps be as well to discover what fortune Algy really had—for she knew naught of Mr. Durant's interview with his father—when a sudden and fresh 'sensation' interrupted the conversation and produced a different chain of ideas.

'A telegram for Mr. Durant.'

'Where is Harry—in Fleming's sick room? Let him be sent for. No more excitements up there, for goodness' sake.' And the Squire held the missive in his hand while the servant who had brought it went to summon his nephew.

What would not Durant have given to be alone when he opened it; but it was but another ordeal he had to pass through as part-punishment for disloyal thoughts.

'Lady Fleming to H. Durant.' How his

hand trembled as he held the pink paper message and his mouth twitched beneath the thick moustache!

‘Feeling ill, I came home. Tell Sir Hubert, and bring him as soon as you can. Send Judkins.’

The clouds cleared from Durant’s brow as he read, and he passed the message to his aunt.

‘As I presumed,’ he said, quietly, ‘Fleming has been made ill for nothing.’

‘How very odd! Whatever did she go away for?’ And Mrs. Bertrand looked up at her husband, who was reading over her shoulder.

‘Because she was not comfortable under your roof, I should say, my dear,’ he said, smiling.

‘Why, she was staying at Mr. Burke’s!’

‘Just so ; but she could not stop there for ever.’

Mr. Durant took the paper and walked out of the room without farther words. So far it was well, and good tidings for Sir Hubert ; yet he himself was not thoroughly satisfied as to whether the message was a *bonâ fide* one or only an invention of Algy’s to throw dust in the eyes of those who sought to see too much.

Till the morning’s post should arrive he could not feel wholly peaceful about Cicely. And yet ‘Send Judkins’ evidently meant that there was nothing to conceal from the Abigail’s watchful investigation.

CHAPTER IX.

ALWAYS ALGY.

CICELY sprang from the sofa as Algy entered the room and stood before him with down-cast eyes, round which the black circles still held conspicuous place. She seemed ashamed to look up, and trembled from head to foot.

‘My sweet sister,’ he said, taking her by the hand, and thus claiming as a right the authority which he intended to enforce, ‘my sweet sister, your absence from Swinton has occasioned much anxiety.’

‘To whom?’ she asked, still gazing at the pattern on the carpet.

‘To all your friends,’ he answered readily.

‘Ah, already! Then the story has not been long in travelling.’

‘What story, Lady Fleming? I have heard none,’ he said, perceiving that he had made a slight mistake in telling her she had been so generally missed.

She did not reply; only covered her face with her hands and turned away.

Of Mrs. Fitzalan’s presence he had as yet taken no notice; but she addressed him—

‘Has Sir Hubert sent you to look after his wife? It seems to me he trusts her to strange guardians—first Durant and then yourself.’

‘The most treacherous chapëron to whom Lady Fleming was ever confided was to Margaret Denham. If you had fulfilled your trust to-day’s interference on my part

would be unnecessary.' And Algy spoke sharply and looked fiercely.

'I am not responsible to you for my actions,' she said, coldly, 'nor do I intend to resign Lady Fleming into your care without written authority from Sir Hubert. We have had philandering enough with lovers lately. How do I know what your intentions may be?'

'You mean to keep her on in this hotel till the whole town is alive with the scandal her absence will create. Your devilish scheme includes the ruin of her good name and the blasting of Durant's reputation as a man of honour, I believe. Oh, I know your game, Mrs. Fitzalan—adventuress that you are.'

And, bubbling over with unsuppressed fury, Algy glared at her angrily.

'Algy, be reasonable—do,' pleaded

Cicely. 'I have gone through so many exciting scenes of late, I can bear no more. Only let me go away somewhere alone and be at peace.'

'My dearest Lady Fleming, no fitter place for you to rest in than your own house at Campden Hill.'

She shook her head.

'I have forfeited the right to be quiet and happy there.'

'Nonsense. This is mere morbidness, which a good night's rest will dispel. Let me, as your friend and brother, escort you at once to Campden Hill, and beg and entreat of you to give no ear to the vile thoughts this so-called Mrs. Fitzalan would suggest for you to dwell on.'

'Being so ready in your plans for Lady Fleming, Mr. Duncombe, pray have you

none to make for me? Whither do you suggest that I should betake myself?’

‘To the devil, where you came from!’ he answered, impetuously. But again Cicely stopped him.

‘She has been good to me—if it had not been for her you would not have found me here now.’

‘Why, where were you going?’

‘To drown myself, I think. Oh, Algy, tell me what to do. You promised to be a brother to me—help me now.’

He took both her hands and gently seated her on the sofa, placing himself beside her.

‘Cicely, do you know how much happiness you are wrecking by this inconsequent behaviour of yours? If you gave the matter five minutes’ healthy consideration—brought your reason to bear on it, instead of

allowing feeling only to have its sway—you would not act as you are doing.’

‘Bravo, Mr. Duncombe—when all other trades fail you can turn preacher,’ jeered Mrs. Fitzalan; but he paid no attention, and went on as though she had not spoken.

‘Fleming is very ill, as you are aware, and is in total ignorance of your flight. When he asks for you he will be told you are at Campden Hill. Go there, then, at once, or return with me to Swinton, whichever you prefer.’

‘I cannot go back.’ And she shivered.

‘The latter I will not urge, but I do implore you to go to your own house at once—for your sake—for your husband’s—and for Durant’s.’

‘What difference can it make to Mr. Durant whether I go back or not?’

‘The difference between a life of self-

recrimination and miserable upbraiding and one of content and happiness,' said Algy, fervently.

'Since when has Harry Durant grown so conscientiously scrupulous about women's feelings?' asked Mrs. Fitzalan, once more interrupting the conversation.

'Since he learned to appreciate and value a woman whose characteristics are purity and virtue,' was the answer.

Mrs. Fitzalan laughed.

'Strange he should look for those rare and estimable qualities in another man's wife!'

Algy started up, as though he could brook no more of Mrs. Fitzalan's vengeful quips.

'Lady Fleming, will you kindly put on your hat and let us go? I have already shown you the high stake—even the happi-

ness of three people—that is in jeopardy if you refuse to return to your home.’

But Cicely still lingered.

‘I do not care for myself,’ she murmured. ‘I shall be better away ; and Sir Hubert does not want me—at least he will not, when he knows, as he must know soon.’

‘And Durant counts for nothing in the scale—Durant, for whom you profess to care—yet whose worldly prospects, whose happiness, whose belief in himself you entirely annihilate by this whimsical womanish caprice of yours!’ cried Algy, growing almost eloquent as he perceived that to work upon Cicely he must make free use of the supposed injury her obstinate persistence in staying away from home would do Durant.

‘If you have no regard either for yourself or Fleming,’ he went on, ‘at least think of a man whose only sin has been a rash

love for you, for which love you would make him pay the severe penalty of forfeiting his honourable name, as he assuredly must do, if——'

'I will go with you at once,' interrupted Cicely. 'You are right. Ah, how thankful I am that I have found a kind, loving brother!'

He pressed her hand for answer.

Mrs. Fitzalan now rose and began busying herself with preparations for departure. Algy watched her for a few seconds.

'You are about to return to Paris, I presume?' he said at last.

'Later. My present intention is to accompany Lady Fleming.'

'Not if I know it,' was the blunt retort.

'May I ask how you intend to prevent me?'

'Simply by having you taken up for



felony, if you do not march yourself out of the country by the quickest route.'

'Felony! Mr. Duncombe, pray do not be ridiculous and melodramatic.'

Be it remembered Algy had not learnt the details of Mrs. Fitzalan's past delinquencies. The shot he had just fired was thus somewhat of a random one. It had not failed, however, in making its mark, for he saw her wince, notwithstanding her careless words; so he thought he would try another.

'No, I dare say melodrama would not amuse you, especially if Durant and Miss Wilson are brought actively into the play.'

'You have been my evil genius from the first hour I saw you. By what right do you peer into the dark mysteries of my life?' she asked.


'By the right which every John Bull thinks he has to insist on fair play,' he an-

swered, laughing. 'If you keep quiet I shall not interfere; but if you insist on meddling with Lady Fleming we shall have a tussle to see which is the stronger. I do not wish to disparage you to her. Only bid her good-bye, and I'll say no more.'

'I know everything,' said Cicely, quietly: 'more than my poor head feels as if it could thoroughly understand.'

'My dear Lady Fleming, do come. You are not fit for these disputes. Shall I send for Deb to be with you?'

'Yes, if you will. Goodbye, Mrs. Fitzalan. Don't think me unkind, but I would rather not have you at Campden Hill, please. I hope you will not find your affairs in Paris quite so desperate as you have reason to fear. For all the kindness you have ever shown me I thank you from my heart; for the rest I forgive you most sincerely.'



‘Pray do come, Lady Fleming!’ Algy was growing irritable under the infliction of what he deemed maudlin sentimentality lavished on a worthless adventuress.

Cicely followed him into the passage. He turned and put his head once more into the room—


‘The tidal train leaves for Paris at eight P.M.’

He slammed the door and strode down the stairs.

‘She is ruined,’ whispered Cicely; ‘some man in Paris has made off with all her money, and she has not a *sou* in the world.’

‘By Jove! and we have left her to pay the bill! Gramercy! but I don’t like that. She is a woman after all.’

So, with something like a bathos, the scene ended—as most scenes do in life—



for Algy ran upstairs again ; and giving Mrs. Fitzalan a ' fiver,' with Lady Fleming's compliments, to pay expenses, was gone before she could speak or assure him, as she most certainly would have done, that, whatever might be her position in the future, at that moment she was perfectly capable of paying her way. She looked out of the window, however, and saw them drive off as she pocketed the note. Natural instincts were too strong upon her to allow her wantonly to throw away a substance for the mere shadow of a pride which after all did not really exist, and for which, with such antecedents as hers had been, it would be vain to look. She was not going to sit any longer in that dismal room now Cicely had gone ; so she paid the bill and went out into the street. ' Her game of life had been a losing hazard,' she thought to herself as she

wandered on and wondered in what direction she should next turn her mind. ‘ No money and a crooked reputation was not first-rate capital wherewith to begin the world afresh, but she dared say it was as good as any other. It did not seem to her that moralists and millionaires got on a bit better than other people. There was always something to fight against—some skeleton to conceal. Precious bad teaching, no doubt, the good folks would say ; but for her part she did not profess to be good, nor to understand subtle arguments about right and wrong. She had been thwarted, hardened, and disgusted in early youth, and she was sure she had done no particular harm then. If she had stayed at Swinton, opened the lodge gate, and curtsied to the ladies at the Hall, no doubt everyone would have said she was a paragon of virtue. Faugh ! she

would rather be standing friendless and moneyless as she was at that moment than have lived and died the meek heroine of an idyll.'

So strong was the adventuress' spirit still in Mrs. Fitzalan, and thus did her thoughts transgress the bounds prescribed by morality as she sauntered through the London streets, on which drizzling rain had begun to fall, and waited impatiently for the time when the Paris train should start.

'M. Barbier—what a fool she had been to trust him! But that, she supposed, was another *mauvais tour* from fate, for without him in the first instance she could not have possessed herself either of the fortune or the name of Fitzalan. After all, she had had a fling, and she was no worse off than she had been on the day when she met Stephen Fitz-

alan in the streets of New York, nearly twenty years ago.'


The facts, as she had received information from Paris were, that M. Barbier, having learnt from herself that the feloniously acquired money which for so many years now he had shared with her as an accomplice was in jeopardy of passing into the hands of the rightful owner, had prudently resolved to feather his own nest; consequently he had taken advantage of her temporary absence in England to realise all the securities, and had gone off, leaving Mrs. Fitzalan nothing but the furniture in her apartment in the Champs Elysées, the money obtained by the sale of which would do little more, she knew, than liquidate her debts. She had received this news just as she was on the point of starting to have an interview with Miss Wilson; hence the reason that the old

servant, who had lived ever since Algy's visit in mortal dread of seeing Mrs. Fitzalan, went on enduring her monotonous life in the second floor in Clare Street, without any exciting episode with her former friend. Now the money was gone, Miss Wilson's existence troubled the quondam Mrs. Fitzalan very little, except that the thought of her evoked an angry exclamation when it arose, for, by the arrangements made at the time, Miss Wilson had had sufficient hush-money paid down to provide her with an annuity, and was consequently at this moment in clover, while the reputed widow herself had nothing but penury staring her in the face.

'Six o'clock at last. Just time to get some dinner and make a final start.'


There is a large, gaudily decorated restaurant close by—this will suit Mrs. Fitzalan's future habits better than a respect-

able, sombre private room in an hotel. She turns in—the first time for years that she has gone unattended to such a place, but Bohemian instincts never wholly dead within her revive with present circumstances. She feels by no means shy, and orders her dinner *en connaisseur*. Then she looks round. The faces are unfamiliar—most of them coarse and hard and deeply lined by the wear and tear of life, for it is no fashionable resort into which she has betaken herself, but one where the real workers and strugglers along the world's highway seek to forget for awhile their homelessness and friendlessness. The glittering gaslights and noisy clatter of this cheap restaurant is to them more precious than the well-appointed, heavily-furnished dining-room is to the rich householder, even though the viands provided are an example of the worst form of French



cookery, and the wine alcoholic in the very highest degree. Still within these walls the toilers find one hour of warmth and mental expansion, while the trammels of drudgery are forgotten, and the dark face-lines grow less furrowed, the heavy eyes less bleary. But Mrs. Fitzalan could not help remarking how different this place was to those of a similar description in Paris, where everyone eats and chatters by turns—‘these Londoners never seem to speak to those they do not know, and only in whispered tones to those they do.’

For some time she had a little table entirely to herself; then a man came and sat opposite to her. Whenever she looked up his eyes were on her. She ransacked her memory to discover where she had seen him before; at last curiosity got the better of discretion and she resolved to address him.



‘*Monsieur est français?*’ she asked, softly, for something in his accent and manner made her decide that he was not an Englishman.

‘*C’est vous, madame*—I could scarcely believe my senses—here!’

Still Mrs. Fitzalan was nonplussed, and by no means pleased at being recognised.

‘*Je ne vous connais pas,*’ she said, shortly.

‘*Cependant*—we suffer together.’

‘*Comment* together?’

‘I was the clerk to M. Barbier. It was I who wrote to you of his flight.’

‘*Tiens*, and what are you doing in London?’

‘I am not likely to place myself in Paris ; and with a knowledge of English picked up in America with M. Barbier, I have come to London.’

‘You will not do any good here unless you have friends.’

‘ Will madame help me ? ’

‘ I am returning to Paris by this next train.’

‘ Then I must find the *héritière* and make terms with her for information about M. Barbier.’

‘ *Mon Dieu*, how black the world is ! ’ cnd Mrs. Fitzalan, laughing. ‘ How few there are among us who would not sell our souls for gold ! You are right, M. Barbier is a scoundrel. I would rather Lady Fleming had the money than he. Denounce him ; I will help you—I parted from her not three hours ago.’

‘ *Madame a raison*. It is well to make a virtue of necessity,’ said the *commis*, blandly. ‘ I have already been to the house of this Lady Fleming ; but the husband is dying.’

‘ Pooh, nonsense—not dying.’ But Mrs.

Fitzalan looked as if the information startled her. 'Not dying—only ill.'

'Madame may be better informed—the *maître d'hôtel* is my authority.'

Mrs. Fitzalan was silent for a few seconds.

Dying—Sir Hubert! Was all her planning and plotting for naught? Sir Hubert dead, would not Cicely become Harry Durant's wife, and the wreck of this fortune—if ever it were recovered—go to him? No, she would interfere no more—the inscrutable workings of fate should settle it.

She pushed her chair back from the table with a jerk.

'Monsieur, I am sorry I can do nothing to help you, but the time is up—the train starts in twenty minutes. Write to me in Paris. I am much interested, though I have no time for conversation.'

‘ Shall I accompany madame to the station ? ’

‘ Do, and then you can give me particulars.’

But Mrs. Fitzalan heeded but little the account of M. Barbier’s delinquencies—the thought that perchance she was about to be foiled in her scheme of vengeance by Sir Hubert’s death was the one idea paramount in her mind, not only during her walk with the *commis*, but through all the hours of rapid travelling towards the great French capital.



CHAPTER X.

A COUP DE THÉÂTRE.

THE drawing-room in the villa at Campden Hill, with its steps leading down into the pretty garden ; though the gay flower-beds which Cicely had helped to lay out in the early spring are now tinted with an autumnal hue, yet the sun is shining brightly on the scene and reflecting its warmth and gladness on hearts as well as mere external objects. Lady Fleming, wan and pale, is lying on a small couch by the open window ; Deb, with her large beautiful eyes fixed on her face, is seated at her feet. For the last few days Deb has been an in-

mate of the villa, Algy having constituted her head nurse; and she fills the function with an amount of importance which is absolutely amusing—lording it over Judkins in the matter of prescriptions and remedies till that equally important Abigail feels so aggrieved as to threaten to give up her situation. Cicely is too dejected to trouble about their little quarrels on her behalf—she has relapsed into a somewhat similar state to that in which she lay at the Vicarage—to be left quiet is all she asks. They have not told her of Sir Hubert's fresh indisposition; in fact, from Algy only, who comes to see her daily, does she learn aught of the inmates of Swinton Hall.

‘I wonder why Mr. Duncombe has not been here to-day?’ she is saying to Deb as they sit together watching the sunshine, for Algy's visits have become the one event to

which Cicely daily looks forward in her monotonous life.

‘He was mysterious when he went away, and said he should be late,’ was Deb’s unguarded answer.

‘He is not going to bring anyone with him, do you think?’ And Cicely started up and the colour rose to her cheeks.

‘Not that I know of,’ answered Deb. ‘But, my goodness, Lady Fleming, how excited you do get! Whoever could he bring?’

‘Sir Hubert. I do not want Sir Hubert to come—at all events not yet.’

‘Law! if I had a sick husband like Sir Hubert I would nurse him, that I would. I wonder why you don’t? But I suppose in your class of life it ain’t genteel to do kind and homely things yourself.’ Which remark of Deb’s explains that loyal Algy had revealed nothing to her of the real state of affairs—

merely told her that Lady Fleming was ill and required companionship and tending.

‘Sir Hubert would not care to have me for a nurse,’ was Cicely’s answer, in a sad tone.

‘Wouldn’t he? That is especially queer. My observations would have told me that if a man liked you well enough to take you for a wife he’d like you well enough for a nurse. But you great folk are all upside down somehow.’

‘Then you would not care to marry a gentleman, I suppose, Deb?’

‘I don’t want to marry no one’ answered the girl, shortly. ‘Them as I like wouldn’t like me, and them as liked me I should not like, maybe. That’s the way of the world; so it’s best to leave it all alone.’

‘You are right, Deb; I wish I had your sense and courage.’

Deb's large eyes filled with tears—she thought she understood the situation; and what girl, even though she be gutter-born, has not a sympathising chord awakened in her heart at the cry of a hopeless and forlorn passion—for Mr. Durant too—who to Deb was a *beau idéal*, the very prince and king of men?

‘Don't praise me before praise is due,’ she said, after a moment. ‘I have not been put to the test yet; when I am, perhaps I shall not prove stronger than other folk.’

‘Ah,’ murmured Cicely, turning away her head from the girl's eyes, which seemed to fascinate her, ‘if one only need not try to resist, but could just let things drift! After all, it is not much use trying, for nothing ever happens as one arranges.’

‘That's ups and downs,’ said Deb.

‘Don’t believe in the downs, and don’t trust the ups, that’s Miss Gretchen’s advice.’

‘Foolish nonsense,’ answered Cicely, excitedly. ‘Miss Gretchen is a goody. What do goodies know about temptation? If they did they would not preach. I don’t believe one of the whole army of them knows what it is to say no and break her heart in saying it—if she did she would be silent and die.’

‘That’s it, my lady. People never talk about what they feel; they do it, and there’s an end.’

‘Yes, there is an end, Deb, and a very miserable end sometimes. I don’t know which is the worst to endure, the virtuous end or the wicked one.’

‘Lor, them’s morals for a lady!’

‘You are right, Deb; I should not talk wild talk to you—you cannot understand.

If only Algy would come ! Sing something, child—it helps to pass the time.'

Deb tried to do her bidding, but her voice was husky. She could scarcely repress her tears at the thought that she could not be wholly Cicely's confidante, and was jealous of Algy, who could cheer and soothe where her less cultivated knowledge failed. She overcame the passing emotion though with that strength of will which was the strong point in her character, and warbled away one ditty after another, casting off all her reserve, and singing heart and soul with the careless merriment of the old crossing days—before, as she would herself have expressed it, 'gentility had come to shut out all the frolic.' Now Lady Fleming was to be amused ; so she let herself go, and sang and danced and talked nonsense by turns, till Cicely could not help entering more or

less into the spirit of the girl's humour, and chatted more gaily than she had done since she left London for Swinton Hall. A ring at the front door bell suddenly stopped them in the midst of their unusual mirth.

‘Algy! I wonder what news he will bring to-day?’ cried Lady Fleming, a sort of cold cloud passing over her as the sound of the bell brought back on a sudden the full recollection of all her misery.

‘Cis, my dearest Cis—so you are seedy and bored and alone?’ And Cicely found herself in Lady Susan’s arms, heartily kissed and warmly greeted; while poor Deb skulked away into a corner, then down the steps into the garden.

‘She was nobody,’ she opined; ‘might go away again now faster than she came, since Sir Hubert’s fine cousin had come to look after my lady.’

True, for a time she was forgotten ; but neither Lady Susan nor Cicely were likely to depreciate Deb's faithfulness and send her into the cold for aye.

'So you made a mess of the whole thing down at Swinton—I had a presentiment that you would. I can't think what you went there for.'

'Oh, Lady Sue, how do you know? Has the story already travelled everywhere?'

'Thanks to Algy Duncombe, who is a sharp boy, it is to be hoped there will be no story to travel. He telegraphed in your name to Swinton, saying you were here, and at the same time wired me a message that you were ill. Of course I came to look after you as soon as I could. He met me at the station, and here I am.'

‘I wonder what he told you?’ murmured Cicely.

‘Not more than I knew before, you silly little goose. I warned Durant to keep out of the way long ago ; but men are such fools they never will do as they are told.’

‘He could not help it ; it was fate.’

‘Oh, of course you take his part—women always do. But you humbugged me, you horrid little actress. You were so bright I thought you had not a care in life.’

‘I was not acting ; I was trying to make myself believe I did not care.’

‘No more you do,’ said Lady Sue, decisively. ‘You care about a talk and a public scandal and a botheration, and yet in the most inconsequent way you are doing all you can to bring them all three about.’


‘Oh, Lady Sue, I only want to be left quite alone and be at peace.’

‘You want what you won’t get in this world, then ; so don’t be irrational. If I were one of the canting lot I should talk to you about your duty to my poor cousin, the terrible sin of your deviation from the path of virtue, &c., &c. ; but I am a woman of the world, and all that is not in my line. Still I do beg of you to make use of your common sense, and don’t put your head into a noose that is sure to hang you in the end.’

‘Oh, it is all so dreadful, and I don’t know what to do,’ sighed Cicely, half-crying.

‘No one was ever so wretched before. I should like to do what is right, but circumstances seem so thoroughly against me.’

‘Look here, Cis : do you think I am a very miserable woman ?’



‘Certainly not. You are the happiest and most light-hearted of my acquaintance,’ answered Lady Fleming.

‘And you would be surprised to hear that I had gone through the same sort of ordeal that you are passing now.’

‘You, Lady Sue!’

‘Yes, I, Lady Sue, have had my little love episodes in the past. I am not so very old now, but I have outlived them. I am a fashionable wife, so the world says, but it can’t say worse, because I don’t give it the chance. Only no one supposes that I am over head and ears in love with Mr. Verulam—no woman could be; but he is good to me, and in return I am civil to him; in fact, I do the very least a woman can do for her husband—I respect his name.’

Cicely winced; but she asked quietly, ‘Why did you marry him?’

‘To please my father, or rather to help him out of difficulties. It was the old story, my family and Mr. Verulam’s money-bags were balanced to prop us both up.’

‘Did you love some one else?’ was Cicely’s next question.

‘Yes, a denizen of that borderland yclept Bohemia. I have a taste that way still; but I have never seen my hero but once since I consented to bear the name of Verulam. Then our meeting was a stormy one—passion and tears, all that sort of thing, and I resolved it should be the last.’

‘Did not he think you cold and heartless?’

‘*Ça va sans dire*; but I explained it all to him very fully; and I have no doubt he thanks me now, for he married a citizen’s daughter with a lot of money.’

‘This is reason, not love,’ said Cicely.

It bears no analogy to the case in point. I could never have done such a thing.'

'My dear girl, where is the difference? You loved Durant when you married Hubert.'

'Yes; but I did not know he loved me.'

'A pity you ever found it out; and, having found it out, the sooner you forget it the better.'


'Oh, Lady Sue, I can't forget — I know I am very wicked. I don't want to see Mr. Durant any more; only I would rather not see Sir Hubert either. Could I not go into some nunnery, right away from everyone?'

'Could you not make yourself exceedingly silly and ridiculous, I suppose you mean? Just buckle on your armour, child, and get up from that sofa and resolve to be

brave and honest, and you'll succeed—that is, if you intend to be successful.'

'I have tried all along, and I have failed miserably. That is what makes me so wretched. If Mrs. Fitzalan had not said those dreadful things to me I should have done very well; but to think that everybody should know I am wicked! I can't stand that and face people—I came here to please Algy Duncombe, and now I am here I wish I was away.'

'Well, you are an impracticable young person! Neither precept nor example seems to have much effect on you. I have adduced both during the last half-hour; but I don't mean to let you slip through my fingers—I shall make a model wife of you in the end. You have not asked me to take off my bonnet, but I mean to stay. I suppose you will give me some dinner. I have



invited Algy—he went home to his quarters to see if there was any news from Swinton.’

‘Dinner—of course—order what you like, Lady Sue. About Swinton—do you think Sir Hubert will come up soon?’

Lady Susan looked grave as she answered—

‘I do not know. But there is Algy’s ring; perhaps he has heard.’

Mr. Duncombe came into the room, looking bright, as he always did. It would have been difficult to eclipse the sunshine in Algy’s character, whatever befell.

‘What success?’ he asked, *sotto voce*, of Lady Sue, when Cicely, after a few minutes’ conversation, went on to the steps to call Deb—forgotten during her recent talk.

‘Nothing but a *coup de théâtre* will save her,’ was the whispered answer.

‘ By Jove, then, she shall have it with a vengeance.’

Lady Susan looked askance, but there was no time for more. Lady Fleming and Deb came into the room together, and Algy could not help thinking of the time when he had repudiated the thought of these two women being selected as intimates for Sir Hubert Fleming’s wife, yet how in the hour of difficulty they had proved to be staunch and devoted friends.

The evening passed pleasantly ; no allusions were made to disagreeable subjects. Algy, who had some knowledge of music, played accompaniments while Deb sang ; and the girl, who had felt sadly out of place among ‘ this grand company,’ was once more in her element when carried into the land of song.

What Algy’s projects were as regarded

Cicely, Lady Sue could not divine, for on the subject of news from Swinton he was very reticent, always turning the conversation whenever it touched on the doings of any of the inmates of the Hall.

It was growing late, and Lady Susan's carriage was announced.

‘Can I drive you back to town, Mr. Duncombe, without shocking the proprieties?’

‘I had hoped you would have remained here to-night,’ he said, sobering in features and tone from his late buoyant manner. ‘I have put it off as long as I can, but before I leave I am compelled to tell Lady Fleming some painful news.’

Cicely grew ashy pale.

‘Sir Hubert!—oh, tell me—he is not——’

‘No, Cicely, but he is very very ill—so ill that he will never recover.’

She hid her face away from them among the sofa cushions and lay there very still, but she did not weep.

‘Has he had a relapse?’ asked Lady Sue.

‘Another stroke, brought on by hearing of Cicely’s flight.’

‘Oh, Mr. Duncombe!’ cried Lady Susan, deprecatingly, as though she thought he was administering too strong a remedy; but he held up his hand to silence her.

‘It is the truth, the miserable truth, and it must be told.’

Cicely raised herself painfully; her features were set—her tearless face looked stony.

‘Take me to him,’ she said. ‘Whatever they all think of me, I must go to him now.’

‘He is to be brought home on an invalid bed to-morrow.’

‘Here? Thank God, thank God!’ And she fell back once more among the cushions.

‘Lady Susan would stay all night, of course—he must go and tell Mr. Verulam that Cicely was too ill to be left. How would the drama end?—for a life drama it assuredly was. Would Sir Hubert die? And if so——’

But Algy only shrugged his shoulders in response to this unspoken query.

‘She does not know the worst—Fleming suspects the truth. It is only a woman of your tact and worldly acumen who can guide this business to a happy issue.’

‘Good gracious, what a responsibility! And Cicely is so very restive and impossible to manage.’

‘She will be more amenable now.



Reason goes for nothing with Lady Fleming ; it is only through her feelings you can touch her.'

'Just so ; and as sentiment and romance never were in my line, it is very difficult to know how to deal with them.'

But, onerous though the task was, Lady Susan did not flinch from it ; and as Algy shook hands and bade her good night in the hall, where these last few words had been said, he felt he could not have left Cicely with better surroundings—'though the hash some people do contrive to make of their lives, and all for nothing too, is perfectly incredible,' he soliloquised to himself as he rolled back to town in Lady Susan's comfortable brougham.

CHAPTER XI.

CICELY'S VERDICT.

ONCE more Cicely and Harry Durant stand on either side of Sir Hubert Fleming's couch. Is this to be the final interview for which Cicely had asked, or is the spirit of him they are watching about to pass away for ever, leaving them free to pursue their inclinations as they will? The journey to town had been almost too much for Sir Hubert; but he had pleaded so hard to be taken home that the doctor had judged it wiser to concede; and Durant, as a devoted friend, had accompanied him to his own house, determining as he did so never to cross

its threshold again after that day. But the spark of life seemed nearly extinct, it was so feeble in Sir Hubert's exhausted frame. They gave him brandy, raised his head with pillows, and watched him for a long while. At last he opened his dimmed eyes and looked at Cicely.

'My wife,' he murmured, 'my poor young wife!'

She burst out crying.

'Don't pity me, Sir Hubert; you have more cause for wrath than pity.'

'Pray do not excite him, Lady Fleming—be careful,' said Durant, hurriedly.

'Leave me,' she answered, 'leave me alone with my husband. How dare you come between him and me?'

Harry Durant started, and his brow grew crimson at this sudden change in her tone and manner.

She noted his surprised and grieved expression, and the tenderness came back into her voice as she continued—

‘Only for a few minutes, till I have made my confession and received forgiveness; then I have that to say to you to which we will have no witnesses. You will trust us, dear Sir Hubert, will you not?’

He bowed his head, but did not speak.

She led Durant to the door.

‘Promise not to leave this house till I have seen you again.’

‘You are never going to be so rash as to talk to Fleming? I have told him all it is necessary that he should know.’

‘I will act a lie no longer.’

‘But, Cicely, the consequences—in his precarious state!’

‘If he died without forgiving me I

could never survive it. I must act for myself now—nay, I will.'

She closed the door and went back once more to Sir Hubert. On her knees beside his sofa she told him all her tale—magnifying her faults—doubling each unfaithful thought. He did not speak till she had finished; then he muttered, indistinctly—

'Poor child—poor Cicely—and I had hoped to shield and help you.'

'But you will forgive me, dear? Neither by word nor deed will I ever stray again. This time I will keep my promise to be faithful.'

'It will not be for long, Cicely, child, and when I am gone Durant will prove worthier and kinder. As his wife——'

'Never, Hubert, never. However long or short a time it may please God to

spare your life, I will never marry Durant.'

'Ah, child, don't say so. While I am ill it has been a consolation to think that you would care for you and look after you.'

'You will live yet many years, I am sure, dear Hubert; but if not, so help me that I will never be Harry Durant's wife!'

'Wherefore? You have loved him too long to say.'

'For that very reason, because I have so guiltily loved him, I will keep my vow to him. Hubert, live, live for my sake, and let me be happy and forget all this miserable past.'

The sick man smiled wanly.

'That rests with a higher Power than I. My darling. If I am spared I shall be a perpetual burden to you; I can never be again save as a cripple.'

'I will be your crutch; you shall be

me—now—always—only say you forgive me.'

'I have little to forgive, love. I was a foolish old man to imagine a young beauty like you could love me.' And he stroked her head and kissed the eyelids, swollen and red with weeping.

It was peace in that hushed chamber—such peace as had not been witnessed there since Cicely's coming home as a bride. The minutes had grown into an hour—then two hours—and still she lingered there. Had she forgotten that other interview she had demanded of Durant? Perhaps she dreaded it—felt that the strength which seemed to have come to her on a sudden, as though supernaturally, might fail her under the glance of those loved eyes. Whatever the reason, she hovered about her husband's


couch as though safety alone existed in the atmosphere she then breathed.

But the day was waning, and as darkness came she summoned up courage and took a resolution.

‘Mr. Durant,’ she said calmly—‘I must go to him.’

‘Do not be harsh on my old friend, Cicely. He could not help loving you.’


Harsh to Harry Durant! How could such an idea ever have entered her head? Better than her life she loved him still; yet she must part from him for ever—so long as they both should live they must meet no more. Whatever befell, in a lifetime of self-sacrifice Cicely must expiate her past transgressions. This was the verdict she had passed on herself as she saw Sir Hubert carried powerless into the house and remembered Algy Duncombe’s words,



that this fresh illness was produced 'by hearing of her flight.'

She crept down the staircase slowly and noiselessly, meeting no one as she went, and passed into Sir Hubert's study. It was veiled in grey shadow, still light enough to render objects discernible, but yet everything seemed drear and sombre and indistinct. She stood there for a few seconds very still and passive. Was she striving to steady her nerves, control her emotions, so that she might look and act the part she did not feel?

'For the last time!'—a *triste* thought when in connection with the most trivial, least pleasant relations of life, how far more saddening and bewildering when it carries with it knowledge that 'for the last time' all that is dearest and best loved on earth may be greeted and gazed on!



‘For the last time!’ How could she say all she had to tell without betraying herself—how case herself in steel so as to appear cold and determined without being harsh? Yet it must be done. Existence in future would have its void—there would be nothing to look forward to—nothing to believe in—no one to support her under difficulties. Only one thought must fill her life—to nurse Sir Hubert lovingly—be his prop and stay, and seek to stamp out every trace of individual feeling. Yes, Algy, with the dexterous hand of a clever operator, had cut keenly into the very core of the disease when he blamed Cicely for Sir Hubert’s state, since she herself of her own free will was about to cast off the shackles which had bound her to a forbidden love, and was determined that, cost what it might, she would bid Durant go hence for ever and let

her be free. But she still stands pondering in the semi-darkness—where is Durant? Yes, it will be over soon now, and then——

She passes her hand across her brow, as though to clear away the mists which hang about her brain, and at last opens the door. The servants have been convulsed in the midst of their ordinary duties by the illness of their master—there is still no light in the hall. When she reaches the drawing-room once more Cicely pauses—she hears a low wailing monotone going on within—can Harry Durant be there? She turns the handle with a jerk, and, summoning all her courage, walks rapidly forward. Some one rises out of the darkness in the farthest corner, with a little cry.

‘Deb!—here alone! Where is Mr. Durant?’

‘Gone!’

The agony of tone in which Cicely echoed the word told its own tale of disappointed hope.

‘Yes, he went nearly an hour ago, back to town with Lady Susan.’

Cicely did not speak again, but stood clutching a chair for support, looking so white and still as the pale twilight showed her features that Deb felt awed and trembled as though a spirit were there. There was a breathless silence till Cicely, said, softly, ‘It is all over, then, and we shall meet no more.’

The sound of her words seemed to break the spell, and Deb burst out, impetuously—

‘He walked about here like a madman—vowed all sorts of strange things—wished you well with one breath, and said you had deceived him with another. Then he flung himself on that sofa and sobbed. Great

heaven, I hope never to hear or see the like again. If it had been me he had loved——'

'Hush, for the love of mercy hush. My God, can it be possible that I am going mad!' And Cicely stood there, her hands pressed upon her temples, as though striving to retain her senses, which Deb's rash words had almost driven away for ever. 'To be mad or die,' she said, after a few seconds, 'which were happier?' Then she gave a sort of hysterical laugh, which frightened Deb, who threw her arms round her and begged her to be calm.

'I am very quiet and still,' said Cicely, still laughing spasmodically. 'Why should I be otherwise? Come and sit down and tell me what has happened. Mr. Durant has gone, you say. It is well. I am a wife, you know, and cannot listen to the mad folly of every man who chooses to profess his love for me.'

The words came out with an utterance so rapid as to be almost indistinct; and this sudden transition from icy coldness to feverish heat alarmed Deb more and more. She could not call anyone to help her, for there was no one in the house save servants and the sick husband, so she forced Lady Fleming on to the sofa, and sitting beside her tried to untalk all the mischief her unguarded words had occasioned, but Cicely did not seem to heed her, and Deb chattered on. At last she started up, and seizing Deb by the shoulders looked wildly into her eyes.

‘Tell me, girl, tell me,’ she said, fiercely, ‘do you think it is possible to suffer as I do and live? What would you do if you loved Durant?’

Deb shook her off with a roughness which was unusual in her relations with Lady Fleming.

‘If I thought he loved me I would follow him to the ends of the world, if I lost both earth and heaven,’ she said, with an intensity which though light in moral was deep in feeling.

‘You! Have you too learnt the bitter lesson?’

‘It matters little what I have learnt or who I’ve cared for—I am nothing but a street girl—but to think that you could marry the other when Mr. Durant was your lover beats me; and him so wild and distracted too.’

‘He never told me he loved me till long after I was a wife.’

‘Lor, I thought women had eyes. I’d have known if he loved me—as it is I know he don’t. I don’t pity *you* much—you brought it on yourself, and must bear your punishment—but it is hard on him, though; he couldn’t help it.’

‘ Oh, Deb, don’t be severe on me. If you only knew how very, very wretched I am ! ’ And Cicely, her paroxysm of fever nearly over, began to cry.

‘ Don’t cry, Lady Fleming,’ said Deb, who was touched by Cicely’s tears, though her strongest sympathies were obviously with Mr. Durant ; ‘ don’t cry—you’ll wear yourself to your grave with all this fretting. I don’t know what grand folk should do, therefore I am bad at giving advice ; but if it’s wicked to go with him as you love and stick to him, it must surely be wickeder to stop and fret because you mustn’t go. Either be off and have done with it, says I, or stick to your husband and be cheery.’


‘ I mean to try—oh, Deb, I mean to try ; only it is very hard to find Mr. Durant gone without one word.’

Ah, there was the sting. Cicely had

made up her mind, nerved herself for a great scene, in which Harry Durant was to be heroically dismissed. In this she had been baulked, for he himself had cut the Gordian knot, and she felt disappointed and injured. He had taken the initiative instead of leaving it to her, and she was chafed and annoyed. Perhaps he knew the surest mode of curing her was to anger her against himself; or perhaps Lady Susan's more intimate knowledge of a woman's heart had prompted the step. Whatever the cause, he is gone, and Cicely must learn to reconcile herself to the fact as best she can. She does not seem to accept the position readily; for, totally deaf to every appeal Deb can make, she still sits weeping there, till the darkness has so increased that they can scarcely see each other through the gloom. It were well, perhaps, for tears to flow, since dangerous

symptoms might have supervened on a state of protracted stormy grief.

‘ Sir Hubert is asking for her ladyship.’ And a servant enters with a lamp as he makes the announcement. While the master is so ill it is no surprise to see Lady Fleming in tears. She jumps up, however, and seeks to hide her face as she goes quickly upstairs. Duty has called her, and she must obey. Harry Durant gone—Sir Hubert lying helpless and ill ; there is no choice of paths left, she has but to go straight on and bear her burden with as little repining as possible. Poor Cicely ! she flinches from the task and doubts her strength to walk heavily weighted along a stony road, yet she is not the first or only woman who has set out before on the same journey. Their number on earth is legion, but of this she knew and cared not, only nursed her own passionate longings as



she went upstairs, leaving Deb to ponder over the theory of the thing with the crude philosophy which observance of outer signs and symptoms had given her. After Cicely left her she lapsed once more into the low dirge-like, monotonous chant which had formed the accompaniment to her thoughts when they had been disturbed. Was it a requiem over her own buried hopes and fears, or over that tumultuous passion which had been raging of late—now, she hoped, about to be stilled and silenced for ever? Who shall know? But that Deb was learning rapidly the first great lessons which transform girlhood into womanhood—thoughtless trifling into sober reality—there is little doubt. Pray heaven they may stand by her to advantage and strength when, plunged farther into the great world-fight, she finds herself beset with temptations and struggles.

CHAPTER XII.

BREAKFAST TALK.

‘FOR a man who has done nothing hitherto but prune his nails and twist his moustache I must say, Susan, your *protégé* is a better and altogether sharper specimen of Young England than I expected to see.’

‘Hurrah, Mr. Verulam! Then in future you will give me credit for acumen?’

‘My dear Susan, whoever doubted that you possessed more than a woman’s share? I certainly have never ventured to do so for a moment.’

‘And you will acknowledge, John, love,

will you not, that I have never before interfered with your business concerns?'

'Yes, dear, yes,'

'And I promise, *mon mari*, never to do so again, unless the exigencies are, as now, very pressing. Therefore you will give the matter practical consideration, will you not?'

'We'll see—we'll see, my dear Susan. Business affairs cannot be entered upon rashly, you know. In the meantime I wish your friends would come, for I have a vast amount of work to get through to-day, and little enough time to waste.'

For Lady Susan it is an unusually early hour—9.30 A.M.—and she has made her toilette for the day, and is already expecting guests to breakfast. Only on rare occasions like the present does she condescend to appear at her husband's matutinal meal,

which he, as a rule, eats in solitude at a very few minutes after eight, reading the morning paper the while. It must, then, be some very extraordinary occurrence which has so thoroughly convulsed the habits of both husband and wife as to bring them together at this repast. A ring at the outer bell, and the announcement of Mr. Durant and Mr. Duncombe, explains who the visitors are who have had the power to upset the Verulams' usual domestic arrangements. Durant looks haggard and worried as he shakes hands cordially with Lady Susan; streaks of grey are becoming apparent on his beard. Time, which for years had passed him by as though it had forgotten him, seems all on a sudden to have bethought itself of his existence. He has visited the Campden Hill villa no more since he almost played false to Cicely by leaving without

bidding her good-bye. Each day, however, he has received bulletins from Lady Susan of how matters are progressing there, and has learnt that Sir Hubert is struggling back to convalescence, and may, the doctors say, live on for years in a state of crippled invalidism, to which it will take all his young wife's care to minister, while an unparalleled amount of patient kindness alone can allay the constant irritability feebleness and illness engender. On this especial morning, however, Cicely's name is not mentioned; the interests of the little party are obviously centred on Algy Duncombe, to whom Lady Susan has of late thought fit to extend a kindly and helpful hand. Algy, quite at his ease—when was he ever known to be shy and abashed?—is talking to the great City merchant, managing to interlard his lively remarks with much practical good sense.

Mr. Verulam is evidently inclined to take the young fellow on something more than mere trust at his wife's word, and, from his own observance and sharp insight into character, to believe in him, and to give him that help on in life which is necessary to every one of us sooner or later in our career, but of which Algy's own father refused to see the necessity. Seemingly engrossed though Algy is in conversation with the master of the house, his eyes every now and then travel to Harry Durant's face, as though finding an expression there which perplexes while it does not altogether please him. Harry Durant has grown very silent of late, and on this present occasion he seems even less inclined than usual to be talkative; while the deeply furrowed lines on his brow tell that the thoughts and memories which are his constant companions are no pleasing or wel-

come guests. Lady Susan, interested though she is in the advancement of her new *protégé*, yet bestows only half her attention on what her husband is saying, for she too notes the storm-signs in Durant's mien.

‘Into the City with me at once. Never delay till to-morrow what you can do to-day—that is it, my dear Mr. Duncombe.’ And Lady Susan's husband pats the young man on the back as he rises from the table—he would not for the world have used the flippant and familiar short name of Algy.

‘To be seized by the collar and carried forthwith to the East—by Jove, but it is out of one's geography altogether. Shall I ever come back—will you guarantee that I shall?’ he says, in his laughing way, as he bids Lady Susan good-bye before following Mr. Verulam into the hall.

‘Yes of course, with your pockets full of gold, to find May smiling on the threshold of a new home. There, go along ; be a good boy and behave well.’

He kisses the hand which has directed this change in his fortunes, and in another moment is walking briskly down the street with the head partner of the well-known firm of Verulam & Co.

‘I hope the smell of hides will be as pleasing to May as it is to me,’ says Lady Susan, smiling, as she watches them pass the window. ‘If she resembles her mother she will cut Algy at once, when she hears he has gone into the tanning line. If she does, so much the better—he will be well rid of her. I wonder what makes me interest myself in his love affairs with a Bertrand ?’

‘May is too simple-minded and ingenuous to let any such nonsense stand between her

and the man she loves,' answers Durant, soberly.

'Ah, forgive me, I did not remember at the moment that they are your relations—my intense dislike to Mrs. Bertrand made me speak more plainly than I should have done.'

'In hatred of Mrs. Bertrand I defy myself to be beaten ; so don't apologise, I beg. But the girls, thank heaven, have been spared some of their mother's miserable and detestable attributes.'

'It is well. But now to other matters. What has happened?' And Lady Susan turned round and looked at him sharply.

'Nothing especially. Don't question me, please, Lady Susan. A man cannot be always equally minded. It requires spiritual life to withstand temptation, and it does not continually exist in the same fulness.'

‘This is bad—very bad,’ she answered, thoughtfully. ‘But what has occurred to produce this fresh phase?’

‘For mere mental depression is it easy to account? You as a woman, Lady Susan, must know well what it is to have days of high spirits and days of abject melancholy.’

‘Not a bit of it; I never was low-spirited in my life without a reason. I don’t believe in it in the very least, and I insist on knowing what it is that has so thoroughly upset your equilibrium.’

Harry Durant gave her no immediate answer, but walked away from the window where they had been standing and looked moodily into the fire for some moments, while Lady Susan watched him till, feminine impatience or anxiety getting the better of her, she exclaimed—

‘For goodness’ sake, speak—say some-

thing. You make me so nervous I feel quite ill. Cicely has not left her home again or committed any fresh folly, has she ?’

‘ Oh, no, nothing of that sort. I have not *seen* Lady Fleming for some weeks.’

‘ But you have had a letter from her ?’

‘ This morning—yes.’

‘ Now, this is past all permission—really I thought Cicely had more sense.’

‘ Stay, my dear Lady Susan ; pray do not be hasty in your decision. She wrote at Fleming’s dictation—signed the letter in his name.’

‘ Then Fleming is a fool,’ was the decided little woman’s rapid exclamation.

Durant could not forego a smile.

‘ Business necessitated a communication—business, too, which is both pressing and annoying.’

‘ You have no right to be mixed up with

Hubert's business matters ; he must find some one else to act for him. I cannot think how he can be so selfish and unjust. You have played a trump card and won the game for him, which few men besides yourself would have done, and he ought to be grateful for the rest of his life, and not risk a second occasion, when you might not feel so generous.'

'Pray spare me, Lady Susan ; I feel anything but generous, I assure you ; and as soon as I can see these money affairs of Fleming's put on a satisfactory footing there will be a vast expanse of continent stretched between me and temptation.'

'Well resolved ; but tell me, Mr. Durant, why should you be forced to meddle with his money affairs ?'

'Because no man but myself can do

what is necessary, for no one but myself understands them as I do.'

'Pooh, nonsense; John was telling me about it yesterday—some rascally co-trustee has appropriated the settlement money belonging to his first wife's nieces; and as he is a bankrupt, with assets *nil*, that silly old Hubert has to make it good. There, you see, I know quite as much about it as you do.'

'You have a broad and general outline of the facts, Lady Susan; but I am afraid the whole thing cannot be disposed of in that slap-dash style. By dint of a little diplomacy we may be able to prove that Fleming is not so heavily involved in the matter as he now appears.'

'How so? John told me he had not a loophole by which to escape. He will have

to pay at least 30,000*l.*; and, as he is not a rich man, he will have to reduce their expenditure immensely.'

'There may be such a thing as a compromise,' said Durant, quietly. 'So much money down, to save a lawsuit. That is what we propose.'

Lady Susan looked at him keenly.

'I am a woman and don't know much, I daresay you think; but remember I am the wife of a business man, and consequently know enough to be fully aware that people are not likely to accept a compromise when the entire sum is a legal certainty. There is something behind this, Mr. Durant.'

'A good deal of diplomacy and a certain amount of law—I told you so just now.' And he smiled.

'A pity you did not enter the latter profession yourself, for you seem an adept in

the art of shuffling. Tell me at once who is going to arrange this so-called compromise.'

'Your humble servant, to the best of his power; and then, ho for the land of poetry and painting!'

'Which means, I presume, that having bared yourself voluntarily of all the luxuries of life, you are going to Italy to work for your living?'

'Lady Susan!'

'Oh, don't look so surprised and angry. With all my heart I commend your behaviour as regards Lady Fleming—that is only what a noble-minded, honourable man should have done. But I cannot see that you are at all bound to give up money for the arranging of Hubert's pecuniary embarrassments as well as sacrificing your feelings for the sake of his connubial bliss.'

'Would to heaven that the second sacri-

fice you mention were the lesser. When life has become a blank, of what use is gold?'

'My dear Mr. Durant, this is mere sentiment. Believe me, luxury and abundance are wonderful aids in helping us to overcome even the worst miseries.'

'And you would advise me to live like a prince in some Italian *palazzo*, while Cicely, through my fault, is reduced to penury?'

'Through your fault—is the man mad?—what are you talking about? You did not advise Hubert's co-trustee to go to the bad, did you?'

'Certainly not. I had nothing to do with that especial business; but had I not in my weakness listened to Margaret's—Mrs. Fitzalan's—plausible pleading to be saved from exposure, Fitzalan's daughter would

have had her own money, and much of this misery might have been spared.'

Lady Susan began to laugh.

'Commend me to a man in a sentimental mood for finding scruples. So this is, I suppose, what you call having a nice sense of honour?'

'Lady Susan, I beg of you be lenient. If you only knew how this tone of raillery jars——'

She put her hand upon his arm.

'My dear friend, I have only your welfare at heart—of that I hope you are fully aware. If giving up your whole fortune—even reducing yourself to rags and beggary—will in any way help you to endure steadfastly, I will not oppose you for a moment.'

'Then you will help me, and keep my secret?'

She thought for a few seconds ; then she said—


‘ Yes, I promise ; for perhaps my influence may prevent you from perpetrating more folly than is absolutely necessary.’

So it came about that a fresh compact was sealed between Harry Durant and Lady Susan Verulam, in which the former explained how he intended 10,000*l.* to be transferred from his purse to Fleming’s, and how he looked to her kindness and womanly tact to help him delude his sick friend into the belief that the clever management of his affairs had effected this, while not the vaguest suspicion as to Durant’s personal share in the matter should ever reach him. Various futile attempts had been made to make M. Barbier disgorge the funds with which he had decamped, and numerous had been the interviews on the subject between Durant and the French

commis who had dined with Mrs. Fitzalan on the evening she started for Paris; but the difficulties in finding and then prosecuting him were so great, the amount which would ultimately be obtained from the wreck so small, that Durant decided to take no steps in the matter, but let M. Barbier work out his own punishment, as Margaret Denham had already done. That all this poverty and worry should come to Cicely through his mismanagement was the one thought which haunted him night and day, and was perhaps helping more to whiten his hair and furrow his brow than the unhappy passion which like a threatening storm-cloud was to divide him from her sweet companionship for ever. Ay, if he had strength to resist to the end the yearning which was ever impelling him to go just once more to the Campden Hill villa for that last farewell

which he had denied himself so manfully and regretted so continually! Pray heaven there may be no more freaks of chance to bring these two together ere a wall has been built up between them with sufficient firmness to withstand a fierce and passionate attempt at an overthrow.

Lady Susan perhaps thought this privately, though she would not for worlds have given her fears verbal expression; but she watched Durant's face narrowly as they talked together, and entered with more alacrity into this money-giving project than she would have done had she not felt sure that a sacrifice made 'for Cicely's sake' was the most practical means by which he could help himself. In nursing the reflection that he had done all he could for her, might he not in time arrive at a state of contentment and resignation?



‘Come and dine and hear how Algy has been getting on in the City,’ she said, as, after a good hour’s talk, they shook hands.

‘Thanks, yes, I will. I had almost forgotten all about Algy and his new career. How selfish one becomes when absorbed in personal worries!’

‘Not your besetting sin as a rule, and we will chaff you out of it before we have done,’ she answered, laughing; but a soberer expression came over her face when he had left her.

‘There is a noble life marred,’ she murmured to herself. ‘How strange it is that the devil, in the form of wicked people, has so much power to interfere with the good ones! I wonder how it is?’ With which subtle question Lady Susan went upstairs to busy herself over her numerous morning duties, in which various little kindnesses to many

members of the help-wanting community took no inconspicuous part. 'Fast,' 'blunt,' and 'slap-dash' were the adjectives by which society described Lady Susan; but, though quite aware of this, she heeded them but little, and went on her own progressive way, helping the harvest here, pulling up the tares there, giving good advice after her cheery, chaffy fashion everywhere, till many an one who had condemned her, as Algy had done, when a mere acquaintance, was forced to acknowledge that to find one friend on earth such as Lady Susan could prove herself to be were worth enduring all the misfortunes and annoyances which had caused her staunch loyalty to reveal itself.

CHAPTER XIII.

WORD FENCING.

CHRISTMAS festivities are the sole topic of conversation at Swinton Hall. For three winters the family has been absent, and, to judge from the amount of preparation that is being made, it is obviously intended that all the revels which were omitted during their sojourn abroad should be crowded into the coming season ; and fervently does everyone hope—both in and out of the house—that no tiresome individual will be taken ill at an inauspicious moment to spoil these gaieties, as Sir Hubert Fleming's indisposition had interrupted the September shooting

parties. May, in the most coquettish of hats, looks the type of a happy simple-minded Saxon maiden, as she stands at the garden-door, twisting bits of pink paper into artificial roses, and giving orders to the gardener meanwhile on the subject of the evergreens that will be required to make arches and bowers in the ballroom, and among the branches of which the paper roses are intended to peep and play at being real with the impertinence of most of the artificial fallacies of life.

May, usually inanimate and bored, has grown quite brisk and gay, eclipsing even the more energetic Rose in the unceasing restlessness with which she looks after every little detail herself, and suggests perpetually new and troublesome improvements.

Can it be possible that the result of the breakfast talk at Lady Susan Verulam's is in

any way influencing May, or that she has condescended to tolerate the smell of hides? Just so; she concurs in Lady Susan's view of the case—that they will in nowise interfere with the glitter of her diamonds, should Algy be ever rich enough to buy any. The Squire had kissed his daughter and congratulated her heartily—be it remembered he had always a kindly feeling for Algy—while Mrs. Bertrand—well, she consented to suffer the affair with as much grace as she could possibly command.

‘It was a bad marriage—a very bad marriage for May; but she was such a silly girl there was no making her understand her own worth or value. All she hoped was that Rose would have more sense. Mr. Seton was a baronet's son—the eldest, of course—and he was coming for Christmas.’

Of the post-obits and kites and sundry

piece of paper, with 'R. Seton' attached to them, which were flying about London in dozens Mrs. Bertrand, luckily for her peace of mind, knew nothing ; nor how the gentleman in question had for some time past looked on Rose's fortune as a stop-gap for awhile, till his father's death should free him from some of his pressing liabilities.

Oh, what a peevish fool was he of Crete,
Who taught his son the office of a fowl !
And yet, with all his care, the fool was drowned.

Mrs. Bertrand, from excess of zeal, was about to plunge her dear Rose into the very marshy ground to avoid which all her maternal care had been for years watchfully eager.

'Of course if there were any chance of Harry the case would be different ; and who knows ?—hearts are sometimes caught at the rebound. It is useless to tell her he was

not in love with Cicely, for she will not believe it. She has asked him for Christmas—naturally all relations should meet together when it is possible at that season, and Harry's only home is with them.'

Will he come? is the question which is rather exercising her mind, for as yet no answer has been sent to her very pressing and cordial invitation.

May is still at the garden-door when she hears her mother's voice speaking behind her—

'Thwarted—I am destined to be always thwarted. That odious Harry is not coming after all.'

'I am very sorry, but why not, mamma? Cousin Harry is always so nice and good and kind—I like him to come to Swinton.'

'Nice and good and kind! Rubbish, May; you should not be so missish now you

are soon to become a married woman. Cousin Harry is bearish and intolerable, and that you will learn before you are much older.'

'Oh, mamma, what has he done?'

'Done! Committed endless follies, of which perhaps Algy will tell you some day. For my part, I can't make out why men want to behave in such an immoral manner. He had much better marry Rose and settle down.'

'Oh, mamma, what can you mean?'

'Nothing, child—my righteous indignation has carried me too far; but as you will soon be married it does not matter so much. Only don't say anything to Rose.'

'There is nothing to say, for you have not told me anything. Why is Cousin Harry not coming to Swinton?'

'Because he is going abroad for an in-

definite period, which means that he is going to live with all those horrid low artists over in Italy ; and if ever he does marry I suppose it will be a model.'

'Some of the models we used to see going in and out of the studios in Rome were very pretty,' remarked May, arranging her paper rose as she spoke.

'Don't talk of what you know nothing about, child,' said her mother, angrily. 'Pretty, indeed ! I dare say they are. As if prettiness were everything ! I suppose men call Cicely pretty.'

'Oh, mamma, so she is—pretty and good too. I quite love Cicely, and Algy says he is so glad, for she is the dearest little woman he knows.'

'Algy is a bigger fool than I even gave him credit for if he encourages you in any

intimacy with her—especially as I believe he knows all about her.’

‘She is his adopted sister, and she is going to be my sister too,’ said May, simply.

‘Adopted fiddlesticks. I don’t believe in such silly sentimentality; it is only another name for flirting.’

‘Oh, mamma!’

‘Well, never mind—if you like it, it is no business of mine. You insist on marrying Algy, so you must just make the best you can of your life with him. For my part I wish it was all over. The worst of the whole concern is being compelled to invite that odious Lady Susan Verulam—her voice will make itself heard in every corner of the house, pulling people up in that blunt, offhand way she has.’


‘Dear Lady Susan—she has been so

kind to Algy. I will entertain her. I am sorry you do not like her, mamma.'

Mrs. Bertrand looked at her daughter for a minute, and then she said, musingly—

'It is very odd ; one would scarcely believe you were my child, May. You have not got a scrap of spirit and determination about you.'

Materfamilias was right : it was strange—a natural anomaly, perhaps ; only, taking into consideration the Squire's calm benevolent attributes, it had its explanation on the other side. And May was about to reap a reward for her gentle endurance and patient love in marrying as good a fellow as ever breathed—violent though her mother's diatribes ever were against 'that brainless, low-bred, impecunious Algy.' As soon as Christmas was over the marriage was to take place ; not that as yet Algy's newly-



acquired position in Mr. Verulam's office brought grist to the mill, but the Squire, pleased with 'the boy's desire to work his way in life for himself,' had made a good provision for his daughter. So the young people had determined to begin their joint career on slender means, and help each other in the attainment of fortune. Surely they must succeed, with Lady Susan as a powerful coadjutrix. Whatever Mrs. Bertrand might say in disparagement, she had elected herself their firm friend, and was likely to prove their wisest and kindest counsellor.

It was a disappointment to both Algy and May that Harry Durant was not to be present at their marriage; but Algy knew full well how painful Swinton memories must be to him, and could not urge the probing of an unhealed wound by inducing

him to come to the old place again so soon, and May wondered silently what it all meant, and why Cousin Harry had grown so grey and quiet on a sudden—for she could not do otherwise than remark the change on the one only occasion since September, when he came to see her in London during the purchase of her *trousseau*, and had brought her a set of lovely pink coral, which he had ordered in Naples especially for the young bride.

The guests had all arrived at Swinton, and this time there were no *contretemps* in the form of illnesses. Little jars of necessity occurred. What country-house assemblage, however well-bred the people may be, has ever been selected with sufficient care to avoid those moments of internal convulsion which everybody feels, though the prescribed laws of conventionality prevent the

sensation from rising to the surface? Mrs. Bertrand could scarcely be called clever at amalgamations; she invariably invited her guests for their social standing—‘position and wealth’ were the only distinguishing marks for which she sought; the more agreeable characteristics of ‘brain or beauty’ she passed unheeded. The collection of inmates at Swinton Hall was thus not unfrequently incongruous; each individual was ticketed with a high-sounding, well-known name, but sympathy in feelings and habits was as a rule entirely unknown. On the occasion of her daughter’s marriage the idea had seized Mrs. Bertrand ‘to swamp the commercial Duncombes’ by exhibiting all the aristocracy of which her visiting list was capable, and had it not been for the much-contemned Lady Susan Verulam, who, as the wife of a City man, stood with much tact on

the confines of the two kingdoms, Mrs. Bertrand's Christmas and marriage festivities might have ended in a revolution which her home rule would have failed to subdue. Not that she thanked Lady Susan for her influence and interference; on the contrary, she hated her more and more each time that she could not help seeing how, but for her, unpleasant difficulties would have arisen on all sides. The Squire had especially charged her to make no mention of Cicely's name, or allude, however distantly, to the fact of his nephew's absence in the presence of guests. He felt he could not trust his wife's tongue, and nothing would have rendered the good Squire more unhappy than the thought that scandal on this subject should emanate from his house, especially, too, as he felt he was far better informed about what had happened of late than was Mrs. Bertrand.

With an unusual amount of obedience she heeded his wishes until the marriage was over—the young people had departed, and several of her very aristocratic acquaintances had also passed on to join another gathering in another country house. Mrs. Bertrand breathed more freely than she had done for days in the atmosphere so heavily laden with importance in which she had been living of late. With the sense of relief from oppression came a desire for gossip, and a sudden wish to pick Lady Susan's brains on the subject of the little drama, one act of which had been played at Swinton, seized her with a longing she did not attempt to resist.

‘Poor dear Lady Fleming, I am so glad she is better,’ she observed as she and Lady Susan were seated side by side in the drawing-room after dinner one evening. ‘She sent

May that sweet little china flower-stand—you saw it, of course—Cicely was always fond of the girls.’

Lady Susan looked at her hostess in some surprise, but she failed to discover her intention in thus addressing her; so she merely said, quietly—

‘Yes, my cousin’s wife is a great friend of mine.’

‘Ah, I know you always liked her even before—and you are generous and devote yourself to her now.’

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ observed Lady Sue, looking the picture of innocent perplexity. ‘Why should I not devote myself to her? Oh, because Hubert is ill, and the house sorrowful and dull. I hope I am not worldly enough to make that a reason for absenting myself.’

‘Pray don’t think it necessary to be

on your guard with me,' continued Mrs. Bertrand, pointedly. 'I am quite as well informed on the subject of her uncomfortable preference for our nephew Harry as you are, but I hope it will die out. It would have been too annoying for us all.'

'Had she a preference for Mr. Durant? Well, I am not surprised. He was very kind to her as a girl. She would have been very ungrateful if she had not liked him.'

'Do you think it was nothing more than that?' And Mrs. Bertrand lowered her voice to a whisper.

Lady Susan began to laugh in her noisy way.

'Really, Mrs. Bertrand, I thought you said you knew all about it. I suspect I am far more in Mr. Durant's confidence than you are, and I can positively affirm that he simply took an interest in his old acquaint-

ance, Mr. Fitzalan's daughter, on account of that odious Margaret Denham's abominable behaviour to her. Your worthy nephew was always the champion of distressed maidens; and if people have thought fit to chatter about his relations with Lady Fleming, it is simply because pure kindness is never understood by evilly-minded people.'

'You really believe all this nonsense, Lady Susan? I *am* surprised.'

'Who shall believe otherwise? What right have we to impute sinful motives to the actions of our fellow-men? I am very fond of Cicely, and most indignantly angry with the individual, whoever it may have been, who has thought fit to poison my cousin's mind by uttering base calumnies about his wife and Mr. Durant. If I only met that person, language would fail to express my contempt.'

Lady Susan looked straight into Mrs. Bertrand's eyes ; they fell beneath her gaze. Having roused the sleeping lioness, she was beginning to regret her temerity.

‘I am so glad to receive such authentic assurances that all is well in that quarter,’ she said, in a subdued, low tone. ‘I have never ventured to speak on the subject to anyone else ; but you, I know, are a friend and can be trusted.’

‘Perhaps in future you will make it your business to contradict any reports that may reach you, Mrs. Bertrand. It surely would only be kind from the mother of two daughters, who might, you know, any day be attacked spitefully, as Cicely has been.’

‘Lady Susan !’

‘Pardon me, but one never knows what malicious tongues, allowed to rage at will,

may not effect. Rumour is already coupling Rose's name with that of Robert Seton.'

'And why not, Lady Susan? Reports *never* get about without some foundation.'

'Ah, it is true? Then reports contradict themselves, for gossiping tongues have said more than once that Mrs. Bertrand would not let her girls marry without money, and surely Robert Seton has got worse than nothing.'

'His father is a baronet with large possessions.'

'Very probably. Oh, I may be misinformed—as misinformed as you were about Cicely, you know. It is no business of mine, I can't think why I meddled. Yes, Mr. Burke, I am quite rested, thank you.' And she turned suddenly away and plunged into a confidential conversation with the Vicar, who had just come in from the dining-room.

The following morning Lady Susan and Mrs. Bertrand bid each other farewell without any mutual regard or friendly liking having arisen from the meeting which had been forced on them by circumstances; on the contrary, there was in both their minds a determination to avoid as much as possible in the future every occasion in which they might be compelled to come in contact. That Lady Susan had got the best of it was wormwood to Mrs. Bertrand, especially as those innuendoes about Mr. Seton were growing rapidly with every hour into prejudices and objections. She must have his affairs inquired into at once—just what Lady Susan desired, for ready as she was at all times to further what she hoped would prove a felicitous union, yet in this instance she wished to save Rose at all hazards from a lifetime of misery with a *vaurien* as she

knew Seton to be. She had a tender place in her heart for all young things, and liked the girl, though she drove down the Swinton avenue mentally resolving never to set her foot in that venomous Mrs. Bertrand's country quarters again.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT NICE.

‘FLEMING seems to have taken a fresh lease of life. He looks far happier, lying back in his invalid chair in the sunshine, than he ever did when he was walking about comparatively in health and strength.’

‘Why should he not?’ answered Algy Duncombe, to whom this observation was addressed. ‘He lives in an atmosphere of youth and beauty—is it so very unlikely that he should be inspired by them?’

‘Perhaps not. Lady Fleming certainly is very lovely. What spirits she has too! I

wonder how she ever came to marry Sir Hubert?’

‘Curious fool, be still,
Is human love the growth of human will?’

Laughed gay Algy, who had lost none of his brightness, though he had assumed a less boyish manner after more than four years of matrimonial bliss. He and his companion, a man who had known Sir Hubert in years gone by, but had never seen Lady Fleming before, were standing on the Promenade des Anglais at Nice, watching the perpetual to-and-fro of the representatives of many nations, when on a sudden they perceived Sir Hubert’s chair in the distance, with Cicely by its side. Never even for an hour did she leave him. Vain were his suggestions that she should go into society—be happy, as befitted her age and position. ‘She was perfectly happy, and wanted nothing more,’ was the only answer he ever received ; and he

was forced not only to content himself with it, but to believe in it, for she was always cheerful and gay, yielding to his moods, interesting herself in his ailments, soothing his nervous fidgets—till truly it was not strange he had become a happier and brighter man under the influence of her sweet companionship. Algy Duncombe joined them in their morning walk, and smiled as he shook hands with his adopted sister.

‘Of a truth the battle has been bravely fought—the victory triumphant,’ he thought to himself as he looked at her.

Perhaps she read in his eyes some portion of his thoughts, for she blushed and turned away.

Algy, absorbed in his work in the City, had not seen much of Cicely and Sir Hubert of late. Partly on account of reduced income, partly for health’s sake, they resided chiefly

abroad ; thus the subject of the old love had never been re-discussed by him and Lady Fleming. Since they had met once more in Nice no opportunity had offered ; but without asking questions Algy had discovered from her look and manner that passion had given place to peace.

‘ I need not ask if life goes well with you, Cis—my sister,’ he said, as they dropped behind Sir Hubert’s chair, leaving him to talk to the man who had been walking with Algy.

‘ Yes, I am very happy now—happier than I ever thought or deserved to be,’ she said, in a low tone. ‘ Only——’ And she stopped suddenly and looked at Algy.

‘ Well—speak, sister mine—what can I do for you ? ’

She turned away once more. ‘ Have you ever heard of Mr. Durant—since——’

‘Good gracious, Cicely! you surely do not mean to say you have never seen him nor heard of him all these years?’

‘Only once, many months ago, Deb wrote me word that he was at Milan—that she saw him frequently. Since then I have heard naught of either of them. Do you think, Algy, that——’

‘That Durant will marry Deb—is that what you mean? I answer emphatically—no.’

‘I thought he liked her—perhaps I hoped he would marry her,’ said Cicely, thoughtfully. ‘It was he who smoothed the way for her professional education and made the arrangements which enabled her to go to Italy to study. I don’t know if you heard that he gave a munificent donation to that home or refuge so considerately started by an English Lady in Milan for young artists

studying music, in order that Deb might be admitted there as an inmate, and thus shielded from the temptations so rife in that unholy city. He would not let us help, though Sir Hubert offered.'

'Of course I know all that, but it proves nothing. Durant would have done the same for a hundred others. It was a love of artistic development that prompted him, not individual sentiment. Deb is coming out in London next spring—it is expected that she will create a *furor*.'

'I hope so,' said Cicely, and she relapsed into thought. It was obvious she had not gained all the information she wanted from Algy, and that a certain amount of shy nervousness prevented her from asking straightforward questions. Perhaps he guessed that she was sufficiently interested in her old lover to be anxious for tidings.

‘Durant is in Rome at present,’ he said. ‘He is painting there rather diligently, but I believe he means to return to Milan in the spring. May had a letter from him the other day, accompanied by a present for our small Harry, who is his god-child. He mentioned you and Fleming—said he had often heard of you from travellers who had met you at various times, and wondered whether it would ever be his luck to see you again.’

‘To meet Harry Durant again!’ murmured Cicely. ‘Ah! that would be a happiness. But one must not look forward to it till the end comes.’

‘Lady Fleming, what a morose view! With this bright sunshine all around you, how can you say such gloomy things?’

‘I do not feel gloomy,’ she answered, smiling. ‘I am perfectly contented and

happy ; and as for the end of this life, I look forward to it as a consummation of bliss.'

Algy stared at her.

' Good gracious, how odd ! ' was the only reply he could command.

This calm announcement puzzled him. But then, be it remembered, Algy had always been a little bit addicted to heathenism, and even May had not altogether converted him. To few beings is sufficient grace given to look calmly on death as a welcome release from the fret and worries which attend even the happiest life.

Algy regarded Cicely's words as showing that the outward sunshiny cheerfulness in which she basked was a delusion—that a dark night lay behind it, a night of gloom which the hottest midsummer rays would never penetrate. But in this he was mistaken. All was peace within—she had

resigned her will freely and unconditionally, and in doing so life or death were alike acceptable—only after death she looked forward to a brighter, more glorious existence. In none of this could Algy have followed her feelings, even had she attempted to explain them; but Cicely had no such intention—she turned the conversation to topics more within the range of everyday talk, drew him on to speak of his child and his wife, listened to never-ending commendations of their mutual friend Lady Susan, and charmed him by the apparent interest she took in all his affairs—only in alluding to the recent death of her old friend at Swinton, Mr. Burke, she once more astonished Algy by her views and her expressed thankfulness that the struggle was over and the good pastor was at rest.

Strange that in all their talk over old

times Mrs. Fitzalan's name was never mentioned. Did they both know something they did not care to reveal, or was it an ignorance they did not wish to enlighten, which made them both so silent on that subject?

Altogether it was a pleasant morning these two spent walking behind Sir Hubert's chair. Old memories had been awakened for Cicely, it is true, but perhaps the recollection was in itself a pleasure.

'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all.

says a favourite poet, and, thanks be to God, for her there was no remorse as she thought over old days.

She had dropped the thorn-covered branch as she toiled up the difficult hill which lay before her on life's highway, and the withered rose-leaves which were all she

had retained, though they still bore a slight aroma, were powerless to prick or wound.

Of how Durant had fared on his life-journey no one knew.

He can bear his griefs in silence
Who can moderate his joys.

That he had never married, Algy's talk with Cicely has already told, though the fault lay not at Mrs. Bertrand's door. On the hint given by Lady Susan the state of Mr. Seton's affairs had been investigated and Rose saved the misery of being linked for life to a worthless scapegrace; then followed fresh efforts on the part of that indefatigable match-maker, Mrs. Bertrand, for a desperate bid in the matrimonial market, and she positively persuaded the good-natured Squire that another trip abroad was necessary to recruit 'poor Rose's spirits after her late disappointment,' the real object being that she

wished to make one more attempt at converting Harry Durant into a Benedick. Utterly fruitless, however, was all her scheming. Rose as she grew older became more sensible of her mother's plans, more annoyed and angry at the uncomfortable position in which they not infrequently placed her, and to Cousin Harry himself she confided her wish to leave the paternal roof and in a garb of Mercy pass her life in ministering to the wants and necessities of her poorer brethren, thus seeking to forget, if possible, the wiles and tricks and chicaneries which had so utterly disgusted her with the sphere in which she had hitherto moved.

As many another had done before her, Mrs. Bertrand had overshot her mark and brought about the very contrary result to that for which she had so earnestly striven.

She raved and stormed and raged when Harry Durant, by Rose's request, made her wishes known to her parents, but the Squire's regrets were the deepest. Though he gave a reluctant consent to thus parting with his child, yet he did not attempt to withhold it, for he full well knew that Rose, at home and unmarried, would lead a life of constant upbraiding and ceaseless worry. She had chosen her path in life, and far was it from the Squire's intentions to cast his feelings or prejudices as stumbling-blocks in her way.

So in the merry sunshine, wandering among the fashionable frequenters of the Southern watering-place, Algy and Cicely talked over all these family histories, till the old days which had almost faded away in the mists of the distant past seemed to stand forth once more out of the shadows which




had surrounded them, as though glorified and brightened by the purer, more tempered state of feeling into which the chief actors in life's drama had merged.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SIÈCLE D'OR.

A SHOWY-LOOKING, busy restaurant, on the Boulevard Haussmann. A brisk trade is going on ; the hot summer's day is on the wane, and the numerous little marble-topped tables ranged outside on the boulevard are crowded with *convives*, principally of the lower classes, sipping their *bière de Bavière* or their *sirop de groseille*, and enjoying themselves in a fashion of which the French have alone the secret. Inside the house, on the first floor, dinners at two francs fifty centimes are being served by untidy-looking *garçons* ; and, to judge from the crowded state of the



room, it is obvious that the establishment is renowned. There is the usual buffet at one end of the *salle*, with its fruit and *sucreries* artistically displayed; behind it, dressed tastefully to correspond with the surroundings among which she is placed, sits the mistress of this flourishing concern—an old acquaintance in a new character, scarcely recognisable, perhaps, to those who had not been of her intimates, and of these she scarcely expected to see many among the people who flocked round her in her present life. Yet for all that she had not wholly escaped recognition, nor failed to produce the proverbial nine days' talk, when it became whispered through fashionable Paris that Mrs. Fitzalan, society's idol in the Champs Elysées, was keeping a low restaurant on the Boulevard Haussmann.


‘*Quel chute,*’ the Frenchmen said, with a

shrug ; ‘but, *Dieu !* I always thought she was *de la canaille.*’ And some few of them, with impertinent curiosity, went to look at her in her new position, as though she were the woman with two heads or any other odd or end which freakish Nature has produced and the showman hawks for profit. But they were right in their comments, Mrs. Fitzalan had sprung *de la canaille.* Thus, she had no false pride or shame, but accepted her new position with the same dignified grace with which she had held the old one. The curious world was disappointed—Madame Alan showed no outward signs of regret over her return to the rung from which she had started up the social ladder. On the contrary, she laughed and joked and exchanged badinage with those who came to pay for their dinners across the counter ; gave *petit verres* of rare cognac to her old

associates when they honoured her with a visit, and altogether let herself go with an *abandon* which would have been totally unfitting the widow of the Champs Elysées.

‘Thank heaven the women will not look me up here,’ was her constant consolation ; ‘and as for the men, the more old friends the merrier. They are *bonne clientèle*—bring grist to the mill, and help to make life go briskly.’

Hence it may be inferred that Margaret Denham had in no whit changed since she left London to make the best terms she could with fortune in Paris. She might, if she had been minded, as far as money went, have hung on a while longer by the skirts of society, for Peter’s hoard, forwarded to her in the tin box by Mr. Burke, would have propped her up for awhile. But Margaret, for a woman, was a fair financier ; she went



carefully into the interest and compound interest question, and decided that her little capital, invested in a thriving trade, was more to the purpose than an uncertain throw for her old place. 'Black was sure to turn up when she staked on red, especially with Algy Duncombe for an antagonist ;' so she threw down the cards, which had brought her neither luck nor pleasure, and with a freshly-assorted pack began a fresh game on different principles. For five years now she has been speculating commercially, and has already doubled, nay, quadrupled Peter's savings ; the excitement of acquiring wealth absorbs her time and thoughts ; and, as far as a woman possessed of Margaret Denham's deep-rooted passions and insatiable restlessness can be content, she seems so. The life of constant action employs her, if it does not wholly fill up the void the past has



made. To hers, in common with many a young career, the first false step at starting is an everlasting bane—that one false step, as she herself had said, which can never be regained—by a woman.

So the weeks and months sped on, and in the fashionable quarter Mrs. Fitzalan's name had been forgotten, or, if ever mentioned, it was only as that of 'a woman who took us all in, you know; but, thank goodness, has gone back to the slums from whence she came, or is perhaps dead by this time for aught we can tell.'

Yet very substantially in the flesh she works steadily on, more *au courant* with the affairs of society than society is with her, hearing bits of fashionable gossip across her well-stocked buffet, and not infrequently giving back-handed slaps to those against whom she has a grudge, by retailing these same bits of

gossip to the very individuals with whom she is aware it will accomplish the swiftest amount of mischief. Ah ! if the great ladies only guessed how those without the pale often work a misery and a downfall, they would not lounge so carelessly in their dainty drawing-rooms and contemn with sneers that lower class in which they innocently fancy they have no part.

Yes, Margaret Denham was unchanged. Contradiction and disappointment had not yet worked her *salut* ; the issues for which she was striving were still the same, only she had pitched her tent on a lower level ; but the end had not yet come !

Cicely and Sir Hubert had passed through Paris on their way to the South—this by one of her numerous agents she had discovered—but what mattered it to her, so that the baronet had not died to give place to

that other love? She cared not how slight was the feeble thread which held him yet to life so long as he still lingered on—a barrier between those two sundered hearts.

The warm summer's day has been a busy one, for the temperature has made men thirsty, and the gay sunshine has brought many loiterers to regale themselves at the *Siècle d'Or*, as Margaret's restaurant is called. Still, though at every instant money finds its way to the *comptoir*, there are deep lines on the so-called *Veuve Alan*'s brow. Something has gone wrong—something of which she does not choose to prate, though it gives a degree of acrimony to her tone in addressing not only her dependants but those from whom her influx of wealth is derived. Now and anon she glances anxiously to the door by which many comers enter, as she had done once before on another important occasion of

her life. But none come and go save those belonging to a different class from the men and women among whom her career was then cast.

Of Bohemians and artisans, with *grisettes* or shabby-genteel companions, there is a plentiful supply, intermingled with just a sprinkling of priests and dandies ; but no one enters who could, beyond their monetary value, be of any real interest to Mrs. Fitzalan.

Ah ! the colour mounts and falls suspiciously. An oldish man and a young girl have seated themselves at a table by an open window and asked for the *carte*—old Wurzel, the Meister at the Art School, and Deb. Have they come with an intention, or has mere chance brought them ? Which-ever it may have been, that they have not been unexpected by Mrs. Fitzalan is very

obvious. Their arrival in Paris is, as are most things, known to her at once—she obtains police reports at will within the city precincts ; but, alas for her ! beyond these limits she has no sway. Have the ageing lines about her face been produced by wearing longing for information anent that other life for more than five years past so thoroughly and completely thrust out of her own ?

Will Deb know aught ? Ay, Deb has tracked her to the *Siècle d'Or*, and even as she sits now by old Wurzel's side is taking observation of her who bears but little resemblance to the Grey Widow of bygone memories. But then, on the other hand, in the elegant, graceful young *prima donna* returning from foreign lands to seek the smiles and favour of an English audience, save for old Wurzel's companionship, Mrs. Fitzalan would have failed to recognise Deb

the street-girl. Time has set its mark on both—while the cup of wine the girl holds is foaming with light froth, the elder woman's goblet of champagne is still and flat. Deb rises at last, and making a sign to the old man to remain in his place, goes forward to the buffet. Madame Alan trembles almost perceptibly. Yet wherefore? She is a believer in fate, be it remembered. This is the first *woman* out of the old life who has intruded on the new one. Her presence there augurs no good, she feels assured, and she cannot shake off the presentiment of a coming evil which will hang about her like a waking dream.

‘Madame Alan, do you know me?’ asks Deb, in English—a language heard but seldom in the *Siècle d’Or*, where foreigners are rarely seen.

‘Yes, you are Deb. I recognised him,’

pointing to old Wurzel. 'You are changed.' The tones were hurried, though there was a strong effort to render them cold and distant.

'I have something to say to you—shall we go into a private room?'

'I am very busy; will it not keep?' was the answer, ungraciously given.

'If you will, it shall be kept for ever.' And Deb moved off.

'Best do a disagreeable thing at once and have done with it. Come, girl.' And Mrs. Fitzalan led the way through a small door at the back of the *comptoir*.

Even during these few words another change of places was apparent—the girl had become refined and softened by education and discipline, the woman brutalised and hardened by friction and wear. The room into which she led Deb was small and simply fur-

nished. The days were long since passed when Margaret Denham bestowed a thought on outward appearance. She pushed a chair towards her visitor, but Deb bowed a refusal.

‘He bade me find you and give you this,’ she said, holding a small packet to Mrs. Fitzalan.

She opened it with an impetuosity which nearly took Deb’s breath away, it came with such a rush.

‘Harry Durant!’ she cried. ‘Why has he sent me this? I gave him this ring in the days when I believed he loved me. Why does he send it back now after so long? Tell me, girl, since you alone seem to know his secrets.’


‘Because he thought as you looked at it a pledge of the old love might awaken tender memories, and help you to be good and just and true.’

Mrs. Fitzalan laughed wildly.

‘ And he sends you as a messenger to mock me. Are you his new love, perchance ? Tell Harry Durant, if he has aught to say to me, from his own lips only will I hear it.’ And the metallic tones rang through the room.

‘ They are sealed for ever—he is dead ! ’ was the answer, in an awed whisper ; and a silence as of the grave prevailed.

‘ Dead ! Harry Durant is dead ! ’ The words came out at last with a cry, and Mrs. Fitzalan, for the first time before any living witness, burst into convulsive sobbing, and threw herself as though utterly crushed on a small couch. Deb watched her till the first wild outburst should be past, nor in fact spoke till she was again addressed. She had no pitying nook in her heart for Mrs. Fitzalan, whom she spurned and loathed. Only



to carry out Durant's dying wishes was she here to-day.

At last the tempest raged itself into a lull, and, looking up at the girl with pleading in her eyes, she asked—

‘The manner of his death—tell me all the truth, and quickly?’


‘He died of fever, at Milan, three weeks ago.’

‘Were you his nurse?’


‘I was present when he died, but not alone; Sir Hubert and Lady Fleming had been sent for.’

A piercing shriek that must have reached even the *convives* in the crowded dining *salle* rang through the air, and Mrs. Fitzalan lay prostrate at Deb's feet.

That he was dead was an agony that years would never soften—that heaven had allowed Cicely to receive his latest breath



was a madness and a torture before which every other thought in life must bow. Yet so it had been—Harry Durant's spirit had passed away while those he loved hovered about his bed; and as Cicely imprinted a lingering kiss on the death-stricken brow it was as though peace came to the soul about to enter on its eternal rest. And she was calm and placid, though regretful and sad, over the death of the old friend whom for the last five years during his wandering she had never seen; but in Mrs. Fitzalan's breast the passion which had never slumbered amid all the conflicts of a tumultuous life received its death-blow with this intelligence. Restored to consciousness by Deb's ministrations, she sat and looked blankly round, as though her mind refused to recognise earthly objects, but was peering into futurity in search of him who had



passed away. That ring which he had sent her had been put on her finger by Deb during her unconsciousness. She gazed on it as though it were all a dream, and listened as one in a vision while Deb repeated the dying words which had accompanied it, and which bade her seek beyond the mummeries and farcical imbroglios of the world for that 'peace which passeth all human understanding' which during her earthly career she had so utterly failed to discover.

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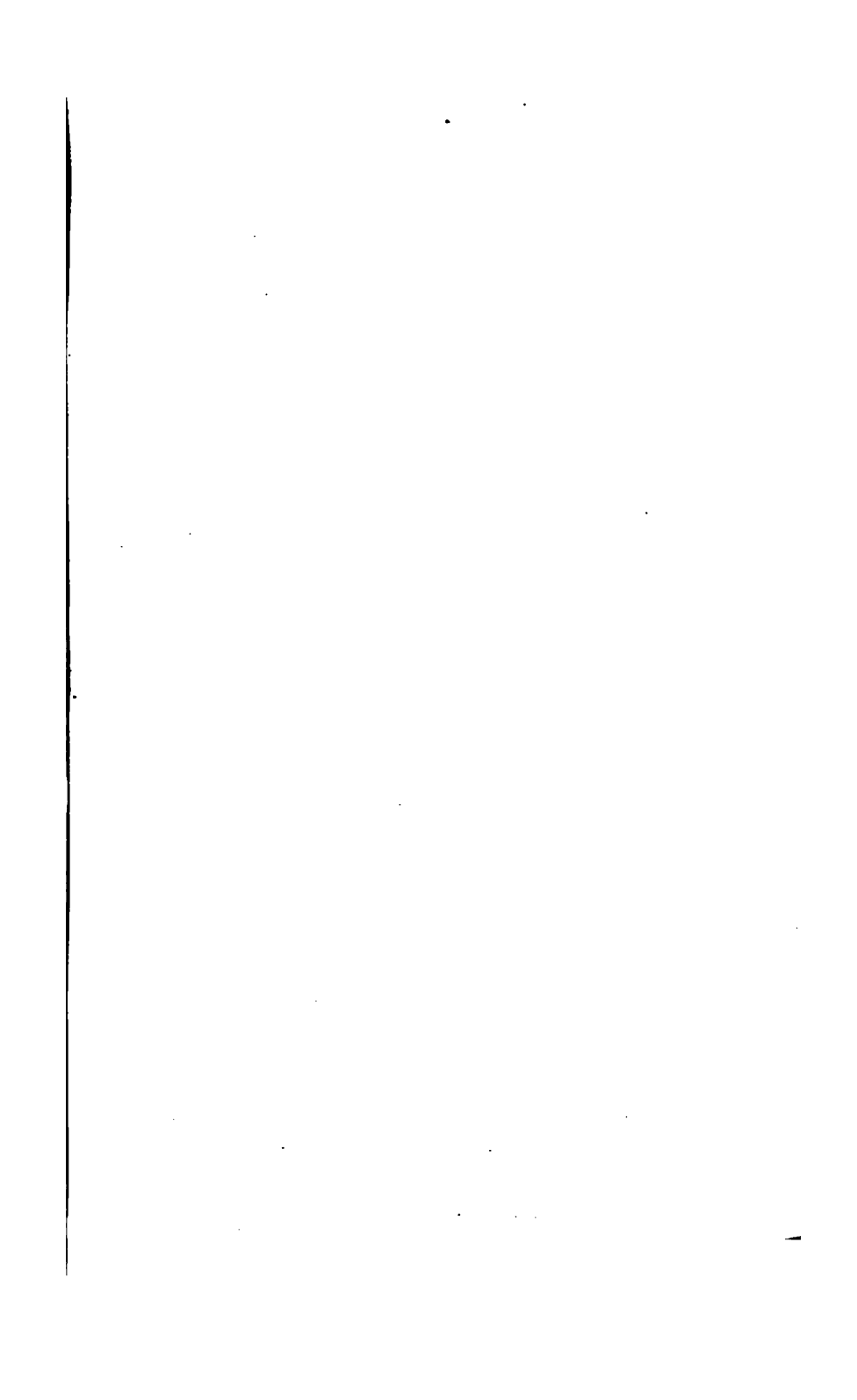
Weeks have grown into months, and the *Siècle d'Or* is worked by other hands. Up a side-street, *au quatrième*, the quondam Madame Alan dwells—a mournful expiatory existence, with no visitors, no friends from the old past, save Deb, who in her not infrequent professional visits to the French capital never fails to go on an errand of

mercy to that unhappy abode. But even Deb's presence, linked though her name is with so many old memories, fails to awaken a feeling of either joy or sorrow in Margaret Denham's heart—her senses are stunned, blunted by what she calls 'the perpetual adverse fortune' which has pursued her, and in turning away from the dice on the throw of which she has so often staked her earthly well-being, she stands alone in the world. Neither asking from nor giving love to her fellows, but aloof from every sentiment of sympathy and pity, she awaits the end which perchance in the long hours of thought and doubting fear which have overtaken her of late she is learning to dread all too sincerely.

THE END.

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1. The first part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate records of all transactions, including sales, purchases, and expenses. It emphasizes the need for a systematic approach to record-keeping, such as using a ledger or accounting software, to ensure that all financial data is properly documented and organized.

2. The second part of the paper focuses on the importance of regular reconciliation of accounts. It explains how reconciling accounts helps to identify discrepancies, such as errors in recording or unauthorized transactions, and ensures that the books are balanced and accurate. This process is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the financial statements and for detecting potential fraud or mismanagement.

3. The third part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining proper documentation for all financial transactions. It highlights the need for keeping original receipts, invoices, and other supporting documents, as well as making clear and legible copies of these documents for the accounting records. This documentation is essential for providing evidence in the event of an audit or legal dispute.

4. The fourth part of the paper addresses the importance of maintaining accurate and up-to-date financial statements. It explains how these statements, including the balance sheet, income statement, and cash flow statement, provide a comprehensive overview of the company's financial performance and position. It also discusses the importance of reviewing these statements regularly to identify trends, opportunities, and areas for improvement.

5. The fifth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate and up-to-date financial records for tax purposes. It explains how these records are used to calculate taxable income, determine tax liabilities, and claim deductions and credits. It also emphasizes the importance of keeping these records for the required period of time to support the company's tax filings and to respond to any inquiries from the tax authorities.

6. The sixth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate and up-to-date financial records for budgeting and financial planning. It explains how these records provide the data needed to develop a realistic budget, track actual performance against the budget, and make informed decisions about future financial goals and strategies. It also discusses the importance of reviewing these records regularly to adjust the budget and plan as needed.

7. The seventh part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate and up-to-date financial records for compliance with applicable laws and regulations. It explains how these records are used to demonstrate the company's adherence to financial reporting requirements, such as those imposed by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for public companies. It also discusses the importance of keeping these records for the required period of time to support the company's compliance efforts and to respond to any inquiries from regulatory agencies.

8. The eighth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate and up-to-date financial records for internal control purposes. It explains how these records provide the data needed to identify and control risks, prevent fraud and mismanagement, and ensure the accuracy and reliability of the financial statements. It also discusses the importance of reviewing these records regularly to identify areas for improvement and to implement effective internal control measures.

9. The ninth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate and up-to-date financial records for external reporting purposes. It explains how these records are used to provide accurate and reliable information to external stakeholders, such as investors, creditors, and the public. It also discusses the importance of reviewing these records regularly to ensure that the information provided is accurate and up-to-date, and to respond to any inquiries from external parties.

10. The tenth part of the paper discusses the importance of maintaining accurate and up-to-date financial records for overall financial health and success. It explains how these records provide the foundation for all financial decision-making and are essential for the long-term success and sustainability of the company. It also discusses the importance of reviewing these records regularly to identify trends, opportunities, and areas for improvement, and to make informed decisions about the company's future.